

Jaguar | JO REASON

# Wild Optimism

Insights from the Front Lines  
of Global Conservation

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RAINFOREST  
TRUST®

Rainforest Trust

2023 Edition

## About Rainforest Trust

**Rainforest Trust is a world leader in the protection of tropical ecosystems and wildlife.** Since 1988, we have supported the protection of over 45 million acres of rainforest and other critical habitat from destruction in Africa, Asia–Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean to help the world's most threatened species rebound and thrive and to store and sequester carbon.

**Rainforest Trust works with local and Indigenous organizations and communities in and around vulnerable areas** because they hold intimate knowledge of their environments—and are key to achieving long-lasting conservation goals. Through highly effective, mutually respectful partnerships, we are able to realize long-term protection of tropical ecosystems, species and stored carbon while contributing to the ecological health of our planet for all living beings.

**The abundant biodiversity still surviving on our planet sustains all life and mitigates climate change in the most effective way possible.** Threats to

biodiverse areas are many and varied, immediate, and ever-increasing. The communities that live in and near intact tropical rainforests, river ecosystems and coastal areas rely daily on the natural resources found there. They face direct threats, both legal and illegal, from loggers, miners, ranchers, commercial fishing operations and infrastructure development.

**Protection requires swift action.** We work with our partners to develop science-based conservation solutions that are not only responsive to immediate needs but also resilient and sustainable. We provide funding, expertise and technical resources to both complement and expand upon our partners' work. Our partners, in turn, work closely with local communities and governments to formally protect these areas either through legal recognition of Indigenous or traditional territories or through the establishment of protected or other conserved areas.



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## Executive Summary

In November of 2023, Rainforest Trust conducted an anonymous survey of its conservation implementing partners in 50 countries around the globe, using an external agency for this purpose. As a leading funder of local and national conservation NGOs in the tropics and subtropics of the Global South, Rainforest Trust works with organizations around the world to create legally recognized, protected or conserved areas for biodiversity conservation, climate stabilization, and people.

Our partners surveyed range from the smallest local organizations fighting to keep outsiders from destroying their environments to national NGOs creating wildlife corridors spanning millions of acres. But the majority of them fall somewhere in between. Of respondents to the survey, 67% work for an organization with fewer than 50 employees. We work with committed conservationists and dedicated local professionals who know the land, species, communities and challenges of their regions.

**The goal of this survey – the first of an annual series – was to understand our partners' collective perspectives on the current state of global conservation. We wanted to hear more – in their own words – about the strategies our partners employ to achieve successful conservation results, collaborate with Indigenous and local communities, and address the most significant barriers to conservation.**





## Study Methodology

The anonymous survey link was distributed to 207 individuals working at local and national NGOs across 50 countries in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The 10-minute survey fielded responses from October 27 – November 13, 2023. **A total of 137 responses were collected (over 65% response rate).**

The individuals surveyed were given the opportunity to share their insights and experiences through standard questions as well as individual (anonymous) comments. Their input was sought by Rainforest Trust to inform our critical conservation activities in important ecosystems around the world.

**The survey was managed by an external agency, Coax Insights, to ensure complete anonymity.** Neither Rainforest Trust nor any third parties, including the press or host governments, had or will have access to specific responses. The survey results were analyzed for averages and trends.

We are committed to providing lasting, on-the-ground conservation solutions, which cannot succeed without the ongoing partnerships we deeply value. The results of the partner survey are critical to understanding the methods that work, those that don't, and how to reach the future we aspire to, together.

Equatorial Guinea Waterfall | JAN ZIEGLER



## Where We Work with Partners

Rainforest Trust works in **Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.**

The areas where we work are home to an incredible diversity of habitats and species, and are often stewarded by Indigenous communities who have cared for the land for many generations. Our partners in each region are uniquely qualified to carry out conservation efforts that are effective, just and sustainable.

By working with and supporting local and Indigenous-led organizations to implement conservation projects, Rainforest Trust ensures that those with intimate knowledge of the country, landscape, biodiversity and cultures of local communities are at the forefront of conservation.

### Geographic Distribution of 137 respondents to the survey





## Conservation Impact to Date

The work of Rainforest Trust and our partners and donors around the world since 1988 has had a significant and meaningful impact on the state of conservation today. The following statistics show measurable impacts by region. The “acres protected” include all areas legally recognized or established by various means, including community forests, Indigenous land titling, national and regional parks, and private reserves.

### Latin America and the Caribbean

Acres protected: **22,253,005 acres**

Protections underway: **22,381,249 acres**

**1,156 threatened species** have critical habitat within these protected areas

**5,072,613,399 mT CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents** stored

Rainforest Trust partners surveyed work in 14 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean. Our survey was sent to 55 conservation NGOs in the region.

### Africa

Acres protected: **17,807,152 acres**

Protections underway: **25,423,104 acres**

**646 threatened species** have critical habitat within these protected areas

**1,594,174,371 mT CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents** stored

Rainforest Trust partners surveyed work in 21 countries across Africa. Our survey was sent to 45 conservation NGOs in the region.

### Asia-Pacific

Acres protected: **5,689,363 acres**

Protections underway: **7,953,479 acres**

**1,084 threatened species** have critical habitat within these protected areas

**732,455,484 mT CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents** stored

Rainforest Trust partners surveyed work in 13 countries across Asia-Pacific. Our survey was sent to 37 conservation NGOs in the region.



Field team in Luama Katanga Reserve in Democratic Republic of the Congo | WCS

# Summary of Findings

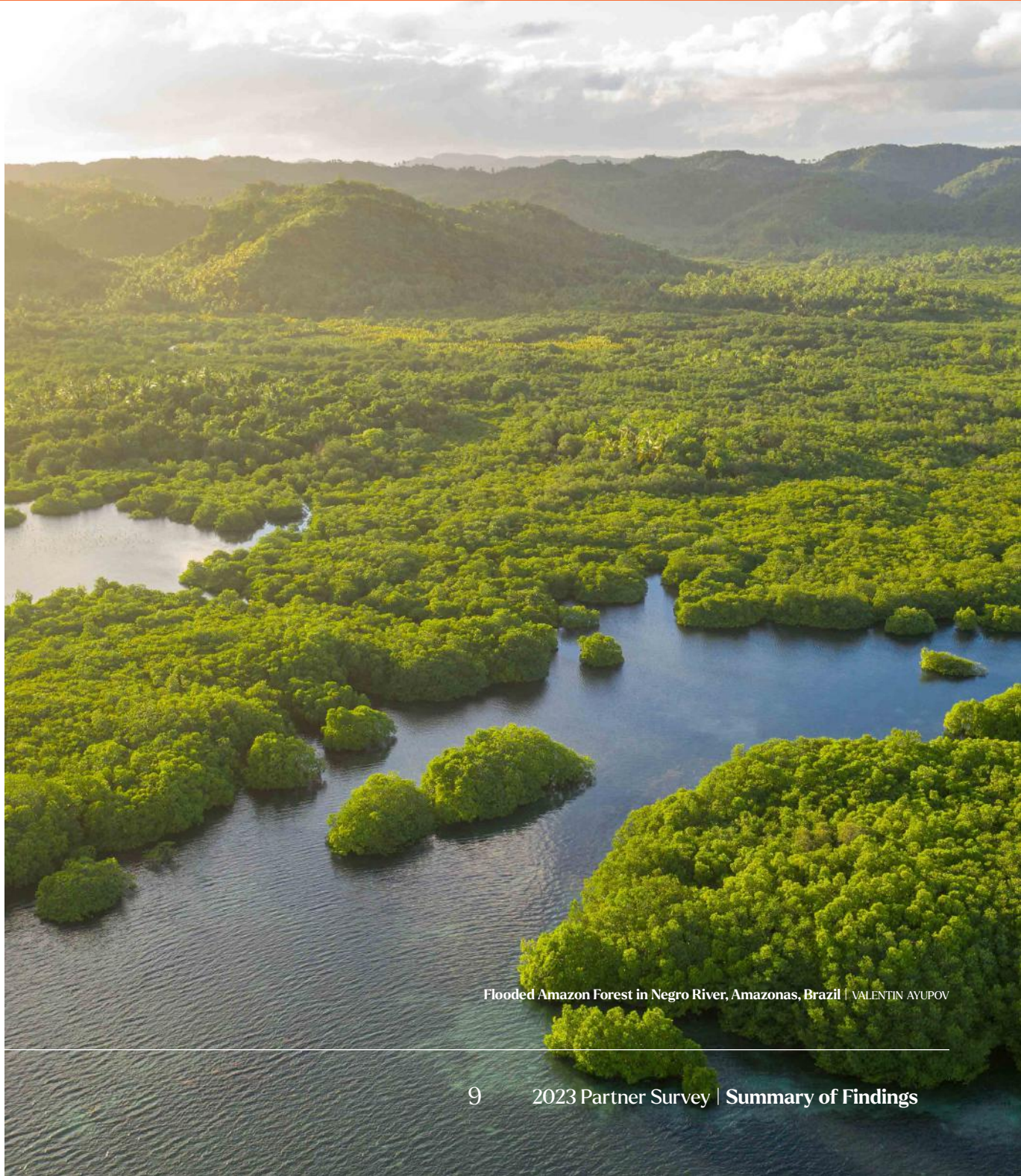
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## Summary of Findings

The anonymous survey sent to Rainforest Trust's conservation partners around the world touched on seven significant areas of interest:

- Optimism or Pessimism About the Direction of Conservation Efforts
- 30x30 Global Initiative to Conserve 30% of Earth's Land and Waters
- Greatest Conservation Challenges
- Climate Change Impacts
- Indigenous & Local Community Engagement
- Carbon & Biodiversity Credits / Offsets / Financing
- Funding Sources & Feedback for Donors



Flooded Amazon Forest in Negro River, Amazonas, Brazil | VALENTIN AYUPOV





## Respondents identified these key areas of conservation deserving of our focus.

### Conservation Practices That Work

- Protecting standing forests
- Global initiatives like 30x30 are having a positive impact on their conservation work
- Reliable, long-term funding
- Sustainable agriculture
- Climate education and awareness
- Developing long-term, mutually respectful relationships with Indigenous and local communities

### Barriers to Effective Conservation

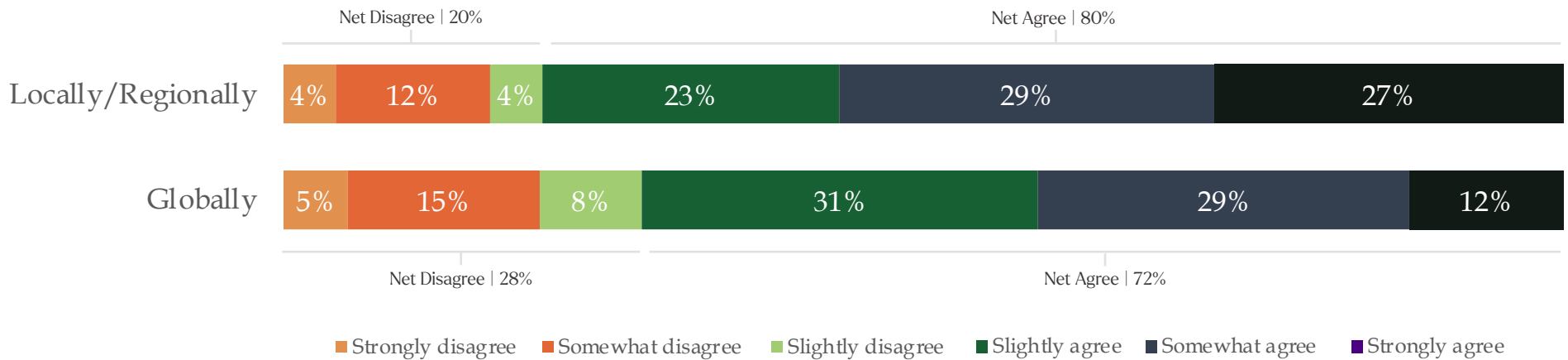
- Lack of political will and commitment (both regulatory and financial) from governments to implement conservation
- Need for more and longer-term financial support from global sources
- Habitats are under more climate stress than three years ago
- Species in their region are at near-term or at immediate risk from the impacts of climate change
- Impact of poverty on local communities



# Effectiveness of Conservation Efforts

Despite limited government engagement and underfunding, 80% of respondents expressed optimism in their local and regional conservation efforts and 72% agreed efforts are headed in the right direction globally.

## Conservation efforts are generally headed in the right direction...



Agree/Disagree: Conservation efforts are generally moving in the right direction in your organization's primary country of operations.

Agree/Disagree: Conservation efforts are generally headed in the right direction globally.

Net Agree = Slightly + Somewhat + Strongly Agree Net Disagree = Slightly + Somewhat + Strongly Disagree

## Protecting Forests Plays a Pivotal Role in Combating Climate Change

The survey responses emphasize the importance of protecting standing forests, with 84% of respondents identifying this as a key strategy for mitigating climate change.

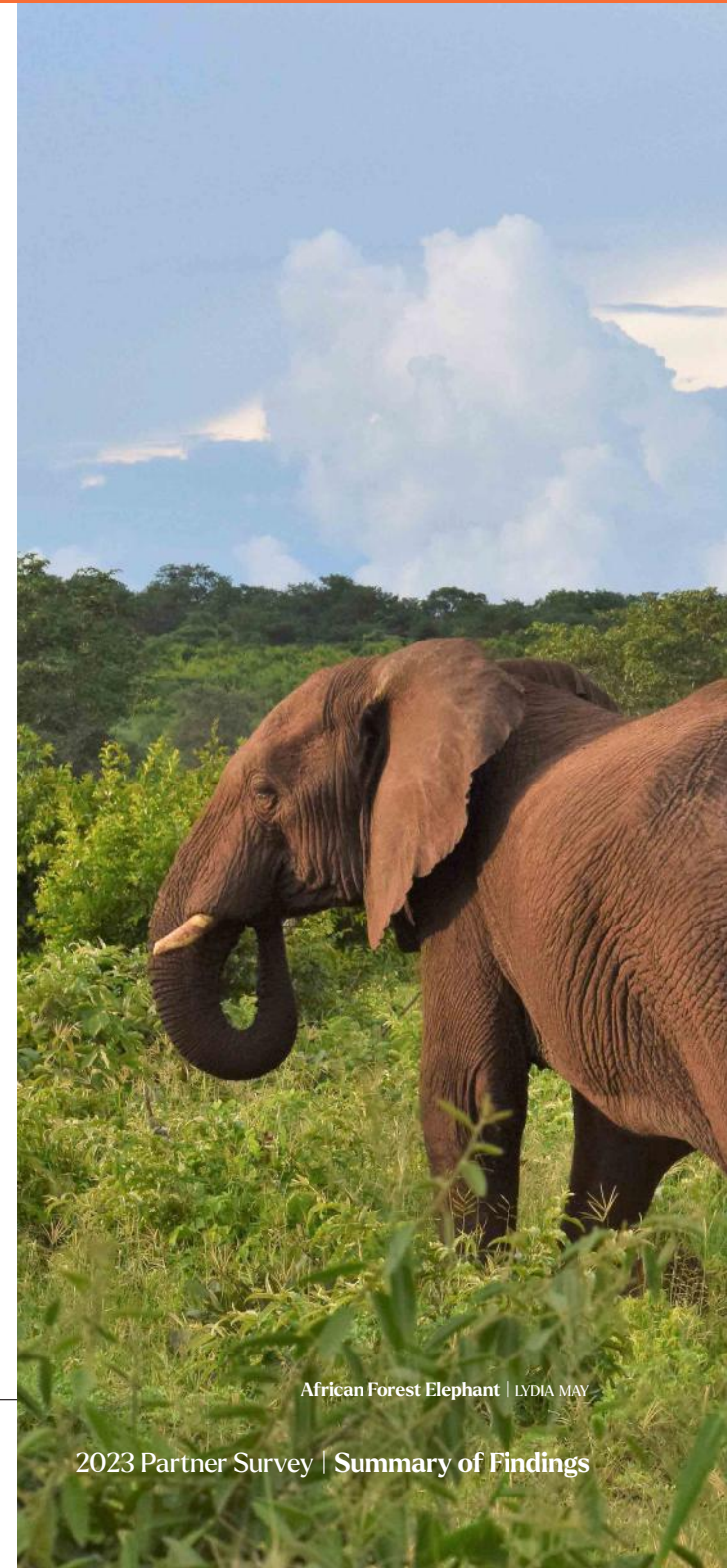
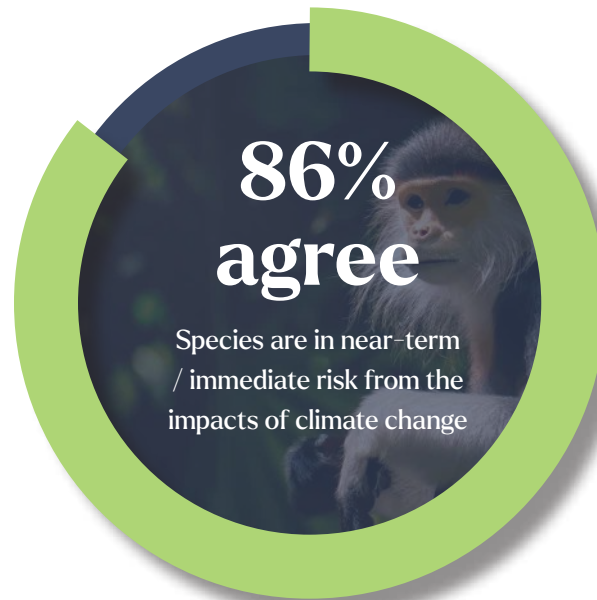
Rainforest Trust and our partners are confident that the simplest and most cost-effective solution to preventing deforestation – and mitigating climate change – is the establishment or expansion of protected and conserved areas, and the legal recognition of Indigenous and traditional territories. In these safeguarded spaces, forests and their species can continue contributing to the health of the planet.





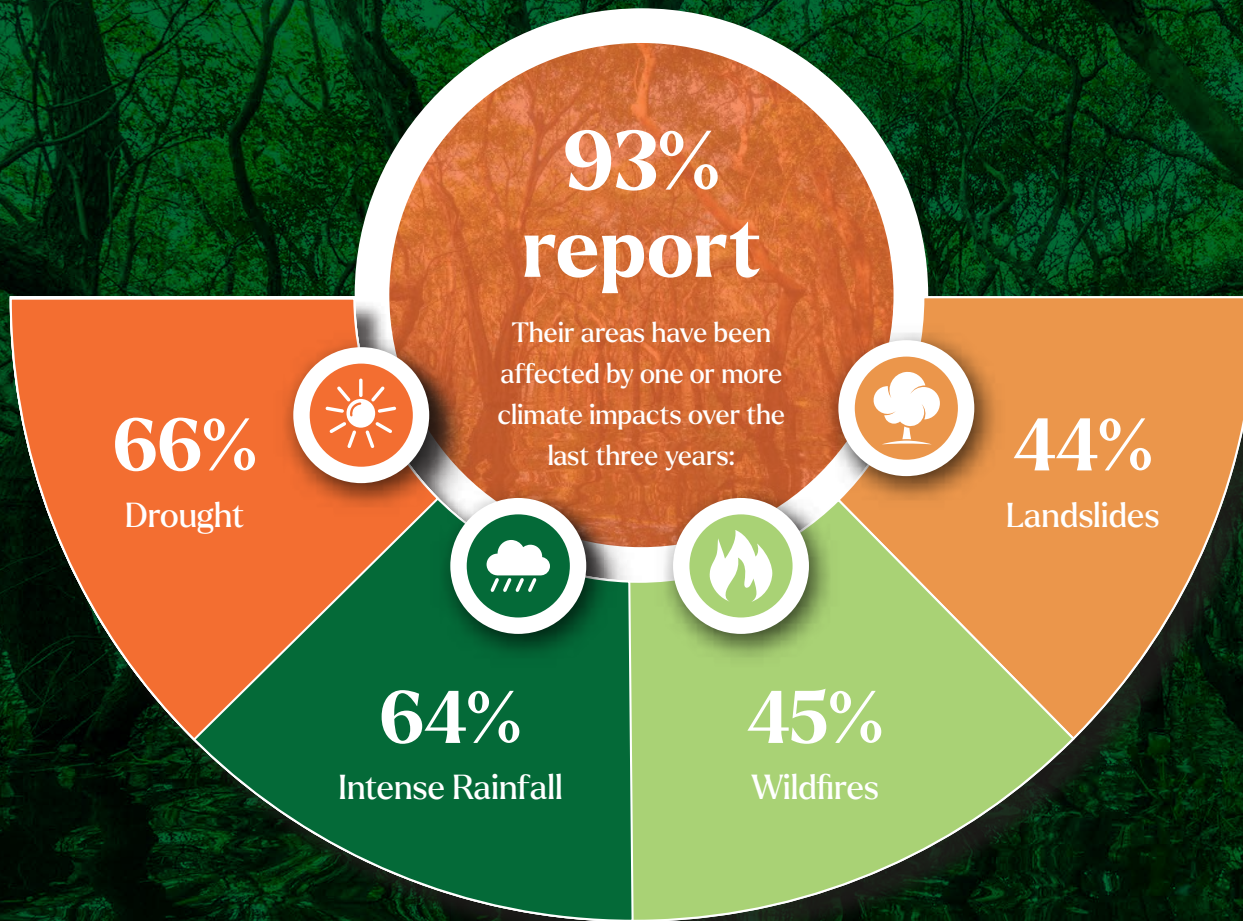
## Local Impact of Global Climate Change

Survey respondents agree climate change is significantly impacting local habitats, with 86% of respondents highlighting immediate risks to species and 88% noting increased stress on habitats, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted conservation actions.



African Forest Elephant | LYDIA MAY





“Drought and intense rainfall lead to crop failure, meaning **local residents need to increase productivity** to make the same amount – the only way to do this is to extend farmland into forested areas. Lack of food also results in increased poaching.”





## Indigenous Wisdom and Engagement is Essential for Conservation

Survey results show **67%** of respondents report a high degree of engagement with Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices, underscoring the essential role of collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and local communities in strengthening conservation efforts.

Flexibility and active listening were mentioned as essential components — in addition to long-term financial support — in working with Indigenous Peoples and local communities with limited resources or organizational capacities. Even for local organizations, it takes time to understand the socioeconomic context within a project region and to establish and strengthen the management of protected areas and legally recognized Indigenous territories to achieve lasting conservation success.





Donor support goes a long way toward building the resilience of **Indigenous communities** that have been **greatly affected by climate change**. Conservation is best achieved through community-led efforts that protect people, wildlife and the environment."





## Securing Long-term Funding is Crucial for Sustaining Conservation Efforts

The majority of respondents report their organizations depend on funding from international foundations (81%) and NGOs (74%), and clearly indicated the necessity for sustained financial support and long-term funding solutions in conservation.

"Go bigger and go faster" could be the mantra that sums up our partners' overall message to the worldwide community regarding financial support for their conservation work. The most frequently mentioned challenge to conservation is the shortfall in financial investments needed to keep areas protected into the future, meaning long-term financing in place for at least 7 to 10 years. Financing is especially needed to strengthen the capacity of local and Indigenous organizations – usually smaller in size – that are embedded in the local socio-economic and cultural context of a region and therefore poised for success in achieving sustainable results.

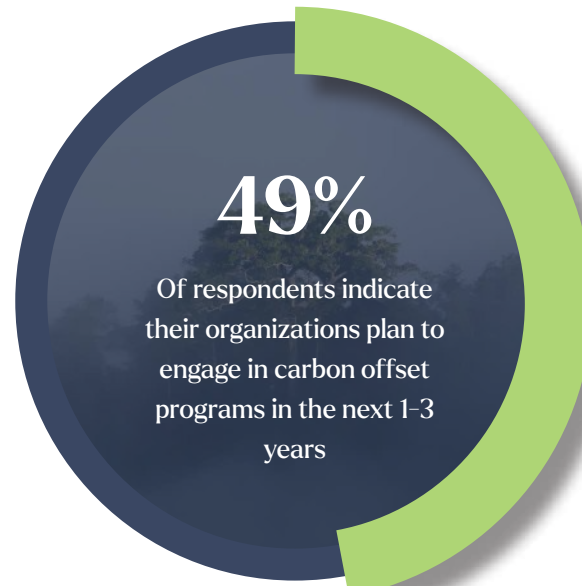
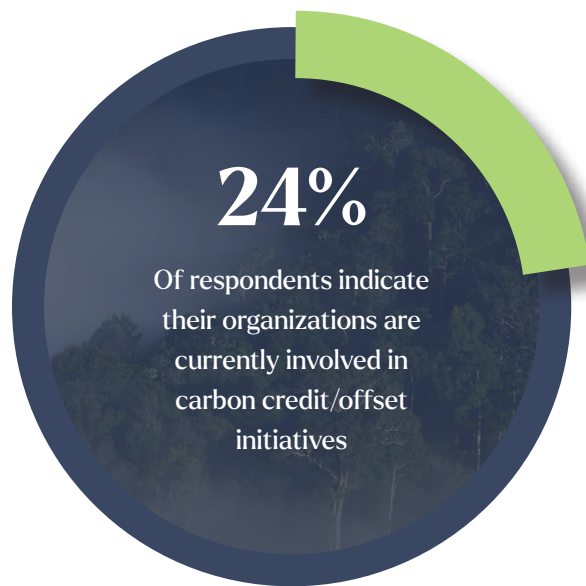
The struggle for local communities to make a living in many regions targeted for conservation requires international support. It is critical that we support these communities to develop alternative, sustainable livelihoods and/or receive financing from mechanisms like carbon and biodiversity credits.

Long-term funding is crucial to impactful and successful conservation programs. Operating on a year-to-year planning scheme minimizes impact."

# Access to Sustainable Financing Through Global Markets

## Carbon Credit/Offset Programs

The survey shows that 73% of respondents indicate their organizations are actively participating or planning to engage in global carbon offset programs, reflecting a significant move towards sustainable financing in conservation.



“It is time to shift to a more reliable, fairer and more accessible system for the people who actually preserve the forests.”

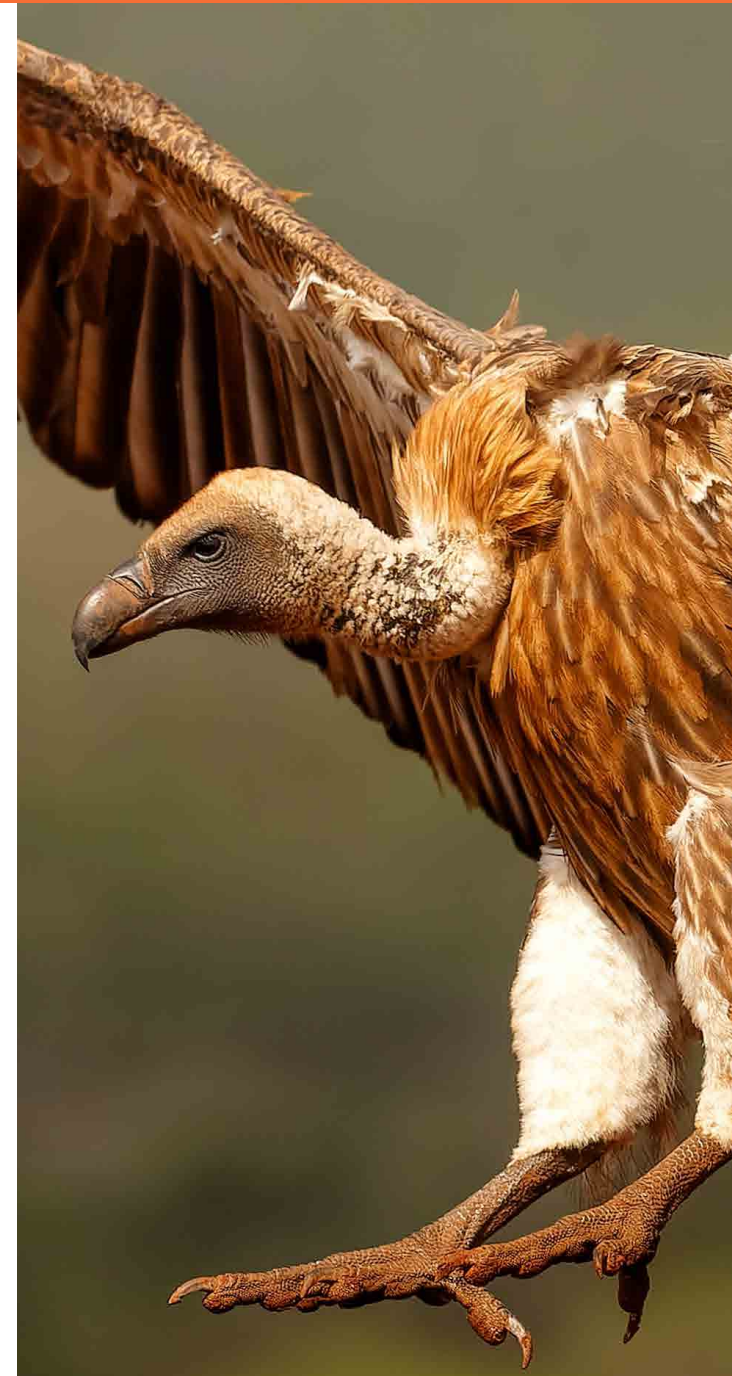
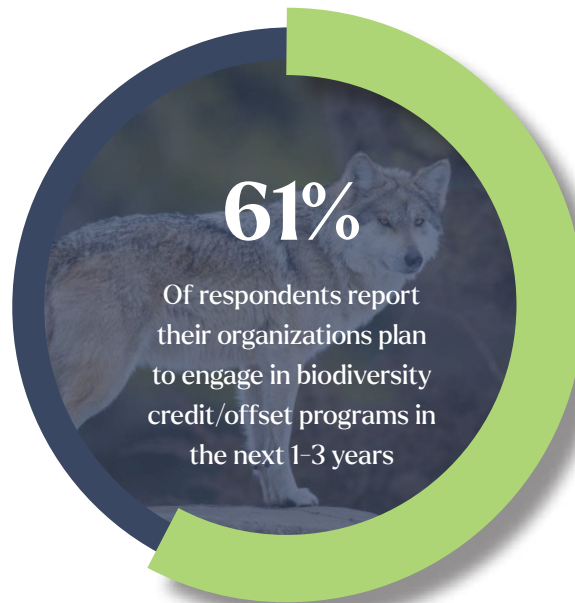
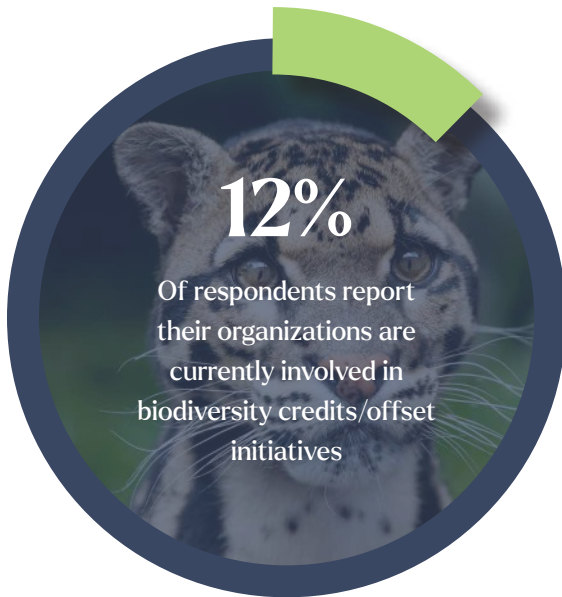
Carbon offset programs are becoming increasingly prevalent as a possible source of funding for conservation NGOs of all sizes, though many obstacles still exist in accessing this growing trend. Regulatory and policy barriers, the complex and costly verification process, lack of organizational capacity to take on such a project, and limited access to finance, awareness and information are among the many challenges. The complexity and ever-changing nature of these mechanisms makes engaging with them even more difficult for some organizations.



# Access to Sustainable Financing Through Global Markets

## Biodiversity Credits/Offset Programs

Placing economic value on biodiversity has the potential to slow the destruction of intact ecosystems, restore those that have been degraded, and provide much-needed funding for conservation. But the field is highly complex and still young.



White-backed Vulture | HENK BOGAARD

## Conclusion

For over 35 years, Rainforest Trust's mission has been rooted in our conservation partnerships around the world. The people and organizations we work with are highly dedicated to protecting nature, our planet and local communities. As we move forward with ever more ambitious conservation goals, our work will be informed by our partners' feedback in the survey, helping us better understand how we can continue to grow our shared impact.

Big-picture takeaways from the survey are that the conservation NGOs we work with feel our work together is on the right path, and we have made significant headway in our conservation work together. There are major hurdles to overcome – especially the struggles with government engagement and support, and the need for robust and reliable financing not only for the creation of protected areas but for their long-term sustainability. The NGOs expressed the need for capacity strengthening and for major donors to understand that effective conservation takes patience and time.

Despite the governmental and financing hurdles, the continuing exploitation of global resources by outsiders, and a warming planet, our partner organizations are able to achieve astounding conservation results. And through our holistic and long-term funding model, Rainforest Trust has been able to support them in safeguarding 45 million acres of vital natural areas.







Thailand Waterfall | JING SUPANUT

## Strategic Initiatives

At present, our strategic goals reflect the urgency of biodiversity loss and climate change in the Global South. Special focus areas include the largest rainforests still standing on Earth – the Brazilian Amazon, Congo Basin, and Papua New Guinea – where we have grown our pipeline of projects 2,500% from three projects in 2021 to 77 projects in the pipeline currently, to save millions of acres of high-integrity tropical forest.

### Saving the Brazilian Amazon

The stakes are high in the Amazon rainforest. Rainforest Trust's goal is to work with partners to permanently safeguard 20 million acres of intact forest—an expanse the size of South Carolina— as new protected areas and legally recognized Indigenous territories at a cost of \$40M over the next four years. This effort promises to safely lock up 6 billion metric tons of CO2 equivalents (more than the U.S.'s annual total CO2 emissions).

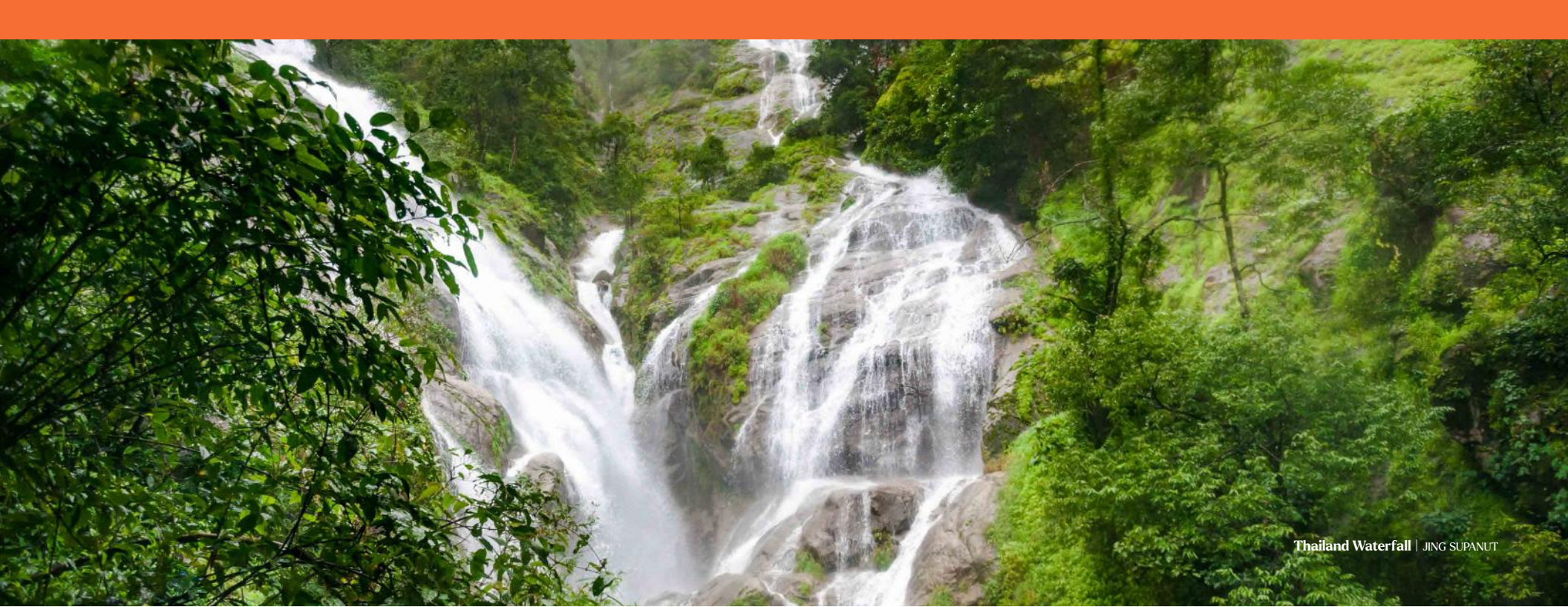
### The Congo Basin

One of the most biodiverse regions on Earth is also one of the most vulnerable. Decades of civil unrest have impacted conservation efforts in the Congo, and the illegal wildlife trade continues to take a devastating toll on iconic species, as do bushmeat hunting, logging, mining, commercial agriculture and oil exploitation. Our projects in the Congo Basin have protected nearly 4 million acres of vital habitat to date.

### Papua New Guinea

The island of New Guinea has the third largest expanse of high-integrity tropical forest after the Amazon and Congo, the most plant species of any island on Earth, and extraordinary human cultures and wildlife. Although the nation of Papua New Guinea is one of the most complex places in the world in which to establish protected areas, saving intact forests here is critical to global conservation efforts and building new partnerships is essential to that success.





Thailand Waterfall | JING SUPANUT

## Strategic Initiatives (Cont.)

### Community Engagement

Working with our partners and with consultants specializing in conservation initiatives with Indigenous and local communities, we are expanding our knowledge and refining our policies around Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), human rights, and human impact metrics. We are also developing an Advisory Council that embodies the knowledge, skills and experience of the diverse organizations and communities we work with in the Global South.

### 30x30 Initiative

Rainforest Trust is contributing our support and expertise to the High Ambition Coalition's global 30x30 initiative, which is having a meaningful impact on our collaborative conservation work with our partners. Now with 115 countries signed on, 30x30 is a powerful tool for conservation of our Earth's precious lands and oceans.

### Protecting our Planet Challenge

Rainforest Trust is a founding member of the Protecting Our Planet Challenge, a \$5 billion private funding commitment to support 30x30, the protection of at least 30% of the planet by 2030. This largest-ever commitment of its kind is aimed at tackling Earth's convergent climate, biodiversity, and human health crises.





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This report is based upon the results compiled and analyzed by Coax Insights Inc.  
November 2023.

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[RainforestTrust.org](https://www.RainforestTrust.org)**

Mangrove Forest | KHUN TA