

Open letter by Swift Foundation in response to "Foundations Stand Together in Support of Forests, Rights and Lands for Climate"¹ and the almost half a billion dollar commitment signed by 17 philanthropies during the Climate Summit in San Francisco, California, on September 11, 2018:



What we mean when we say "Supporting Forests, Rights, and Lands for Climate"

By Sonja Swift on behalf of the Swift Foundation staff and board of directors.

We signed on. In advance of the Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco last September, the Swift Foundation was approached and agreed to become a signatory on an almost [half-billion dollar pledge by 17 foundations](#) to "step up our support to protect, restore, and expand forests, make land use more sustainable, and secure the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, who are the best stewards of their lands, territories, and forests."

We were inspired by the acknowledgement of the integral role indigenous communities serve as caretakers of their home territories, especially given [how conservation has problematically been viewed as separate from local caretaking](#). We agree to this commitment with 16 of our peer foundations in principle.

We also feel it necessary to clarify how we aspire to live this commitment in practice, in order to hold ourselves accountable to it. Furthermore, we share our interpretation of this commitment with an understanding that funding - depending on how it is used - can be as destructive as it can be helpful. That is why below we acknowledge what we *do not* stand for as well.

Guiding reflections

Of [funding priorities articulated in the commitment](#), we offer the following reflections to clarify how we interpret and stand by this commitment in practice.

- Community forest management based on customary traditional knowledge is the most effective way of protecting forests. An important first step is resolving outstanding [land tenure issues](#). This work must be done in strict accordance with the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

(UNDRIP), human rights jurisprudence and [Free Prior and Informed Consent](#) (FPIC). Many [studies](#) have shown that land managed by Indigenous Peoples with strong land tenure has significantly lower rates of deforestation than land under other governance systems, including protected areas.

- Supporting Indigenous Peoples' [rights to their territory](#) means investing in processes of [governance and collective leadership](#) that engage communities to manage their territories in ways that reflect their priorities and worldview.² This work is not a "quick fix" for carbon (dioxide) sequestration, but rather involves years of long-term partnerships that build up relationships and create resilient and inclusive models of community management in which diverse actors play a role.
- There is a brutal and ineffective legacy of "conservation" kicking people off their homelands in order to "protect" Nature for the sake of recreationists and elites. This is premised on a misguided [Euro-colonial idea of Nature as separate from people/culture](#). Working from a framework of [biocultural diversity](#) seeks to mend this imposed split and prioritize support for Indigenous Peoples' territories, not protected areas.³
- Oil, gas, coal, large scale infrastructure, mega-dams, industrial logging and [agribusiness](#) are the main causes of deforestation (not smallholder farmers or peasant agriculture) and must be held accountable. Strategies for holding these energy and agribusiness industries accountable include shareholder activism, divestment, and funding watchdog and advocacy groups.
- [Agribusiness](#), with its perverse promotion and use of GMO seeds and crops, chemical inputs (war chemicals turned into pesticides)⁴, [land grabbing](#) and free trade agreements (NAFTA, CAFTA, etc.)⁵ is a major contributor to climate change. [Agroecology](#), on the other hand, is a science, practice and movement for social change that is central to food sovereignty and the healthy use, as well as preservation and restoration of remaining intact ecosystems.⁶ Therefore agroecology is an effective conservation strategy for communities living in and around forests.

² The Wet'suwet'en Nation territorial governance of their *Yintah*, or homeland, is relevant not just because of the current attack by TransCanada (now TC Energy)/Coastal Gas Link but also because Swift Foundation has funded the Office of Wet'suwet'en for years, so we offer this as an example. For further background see: Knight, Natalie, "Wet'suwet'en Strong": Indigenous Resistance in Canada, <https://portside.org/2019-02-18/wetsuweten-strong-indigenous-resistance-canada>, (February 18, 2019).

³ Two examples of indigenous led homeland protection include the Parque de la Papa in Peru and the Edézhíé in the Northwest Territories, Canada.

⁴ Martindale, Dayton, "Beating Swords into Plowshares, Poison Gas into Pesticides," <http://inthesetimes.com/rural-america/entry/18137/beating-swords-into-plowshares-poison-gas-into-pesticides> (July 5, 2015).

⁵ "Central America Free Trade Agreement," Public Citizen, <https://www.citizen.org/our-work/globalization-and-trade/nafta-wto-other-trade-pacts/cafta> (2019).

⁶ Also see: Community Agroecology Network - <https://canunite.org/our-work/agroecology> & Groundswell International - <https://www.groundswellinternational.org/sustainable-development/agroecology/> & Oakland Institute "Agroecology case studies"- <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/agroecology-case-studies>

- Essential to the broader change in economy that we need is making a “[Just Transition](#),” that is, a shift from an extractive economy to a local, regenerative and living economy. We acknowledge that as a foundation this is why we must continue to [transition our endowment](#) away from extractive industries so our investments do not perpetuate the very problems we seek to address.
- There are plenty of alternatives to extraction including community-led renewable energy, energy saving and efficiency. Community-led action is at the heart of any of these strategies, if they are to be just and durable. Clean energy projects that don’t respect indigenous land rights are not solutions.
- The death toll of indigenous environmental defenders, and the [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women](#), is directly related to extractive industries as well as industrial agriculture.⁷ This is why applying a human rights based lens with regard to climate funding must be a priority because the issues are intrinsically and devastatingly related.

Swift Foundation rejects the privatization and commodification of Nature and REDD+

Given that carbon market schemes have for years been promoted in concert with "protecting forests" and "recognizing indigenous people’s rights" we want to make clear we do not support carbon trading programs within our interpretation of the commitment.

We explicitly and resolutely reject carbon trading schemes of any kind and consider these agendas to be [false solutions](#). This includes [REDD+](#) (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) and/or by any name including: carbon pricing, cap and trade programs, carbon tax when used to create further infrastructure for carbon trading schemes, forest offsets, and California’s proposed [Tropical Forest Standard](#).⁸ We agree with grant partners that it would be far more effective to focus on stopping subsidies that go toward agribusiness and extractive energy industries.⁹

⁷ “At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017” Global Witness Report, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/at-what-cost/> & <https://urgentactionfund.org/in-our-bones/>, (July 24, 2018).

⁸ For further background on concerns regarding TFS see the following comments to the California Air Resources Board: Indigenous Environmental Network, <https://www.arb.ca.gov/lists/com-attach/5-tfs2018-UzpXNFQ7WFQDKAJd.pdf> (October 22, 2018) & Amazon Watch <https://www.arb.ca.gov/lists/com-attach/57-tfs2018-UzIACQBeUGADZAh6.pdf> (October 29, 2018). NOTE: letters of support came from entities with entrenched interests, including Shell Oil and PG&E as well as large conservation organizations.

⁹ See chapter 4 in Carbon Pricing: A Critical Perspective for Community Resistance: <http://www.ienearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Carbon-Pricing-A-Critical-Perspective-for-Community-Resistance-Online-Version.pdf> (October 2017).

REDD schemes have already caused divisiveness, land grabbing and [violence](#).¹⁰ One of the core issues is that in the majority of researched cases in which REDD has been implemented, the results have been negative for the community due to *noncompliance* with FPIC.¹¹ In other words, REDD schemes have denied Indigenous Peoples their territorial and legal rights, leading to food insecurity, illegal land grabs, the increase of monoculture farming, and invasive stakeholders.

Ironically, REDD does not incentivize protection of forests and biodiversity, as forests can qualify as an offset while being clear-cut and replanted as monocultures. This means that [REDD does not reduce emissions](#), but rather enables polluters to continue to increase greenhouse gas emissions, with particularly acute impacts on communities where those polluters are located.

Swift Foundation board and staff simply do not support this kind of greenwash of extractivism and privatization of Nature. Forests are alive, they are more than just “carbon.” To avoid ecological collapse, we must definitively halt further extraction; cut emissions at the source; leave fossil fuels and rare earth minerals in the ground and in the oceans; shut down the Canadian Tar Sands; stop pipelines destined to transport Tar Sands and fracked oil; stop fossil fuel subsidies, including agribusiness subsidies for agrofuels, and cease carbon and biodiversity offset projects that continue to allow polluters to pollute.

Providing extractive industries the option to buy offsets through carbon trading rather than cutting emissions at the source does nothing to address climate change, and only further imperils our children’s future and the future of Life on Earth.

Conclusion

Core to our role as a foundation is discernment, through listening and ideally also through accountability to our partners, such that we do not perpetuate ineffective or harmful initiatives through our funding.¹² We believe we must work with urgency, while also slowing down enough to support those that protect their own cultural and intellectual diversity.

¹⁰ Also see: “The Darker Side of Green,” Oakland Institute, https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/Report_DarkerSideofGreen_hirez.pdf (November, 2014).

¹¹ Studies “find that outside entities (e.g. governments, investors or civil society organizations) with an agenda undermine the process to achieve their goals.” See: “Ecuador’s Forest Partners Program: An overview of Socio Bosque Contracts with Indigenous Communities,” Amazon Watch, <https://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2011-socio-bosque-executive-summary.pdf>, December 2011).

¹² See this interview with Edgar Villanueva, author of *Decolonizing Wealth*: Bornstein, David, “A Call to Modernize American Philanthropy,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/opinion/philanthropy-minorities-charities.html>, (November 27, 2018). (November 8, 2018)

For Swift Foundation, this means supporting grassroots leadership on the frontlines,¹³ while also showing more active leadership among our own institutions in disrupting false solutions to climate change.¹⁴ We recognize this as a pivotal moment in history when there is no more time for distractions or compromises, and we invite other foundations to join us in clarifying their own approaches to addressing the critical role of Indigenous Peoples in protecting and sustaining living forests.¹⁵

¹³ Given the prevalent corruption in many governments, it is more productive and enduring to fund people on the ground than intermediaries.

¹⁴ Nor do we support geoengineering, gene drives or other such technological manipulations of the complex intelligence of Nature. For background see: "Forcing the Farm: How Gene Drive Organisms Could Entrench Industrial Agriculture and Threaten Food Sovereignty," ETC Group, http://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/etc_hbf_forcing_the_farm_web.pdf (October 2018) & "China's Plan to Seed Himalayan Clouds is Geoengineering – Unintentional or Otherwise," ETC Group, <http://www.etcgroup.org/content/chinas-plan-engineer-himalayan-clouds-geoengineering-unintentional-or-otherwise> (November 8, 2018).

¹⁵ In solidarity with the Sarayaku people's Kawsak Sacha (Living Forest) declaration: "The Sarayaku people present a declaration to preserve the territory and nature," IUCN, <https://www.iucn.org/news/mexico-central-america-and-caribbean/201808/sarayaku-people-present-declaration-preserve-territory-and-nature>, (August 3, 2018).