



# Territories of life: Proposals for the care and protection of environmental human rights defenders

## Demands for care and protection

- 1 **Territories of life:** Ensuring collective tenure and ownership rights over territories, based on the recognition of custodians' governance systems.
- 2 **Escazú in practice:** Promoting the ratification of the Escazú Agreement by all Latin American and Caribbean member countries, ensuring that authorities comply with its provisions, and fostering its dissemination through culturally appropriate means among custodians of territories of life.
- 3 **Justice, reparation, and non-repetition:** Ensuring the rule of law by strengthening safe access to justice and redress through timely responses to reports, effective investigations, actions against those responsible, and measures that guarantee non-repetition.
- 4 **Legal defense:** Ensuring policies that provide immediate legal support grounded in legal pluralism and allocating resources to fund legal advisory services for custodians of territories of life.
- 5 **Comprehensive care:** Providing comprehensive, personalized, and collective care plans with a multicultural approach, including psychosocial support, temporary shelters, and, when necessary, the safe relocation of people at risk.
- 6 **Social tapestry and security:** Promoting peacebuilding within territories of life by recognizing and strengthening their self-governance systems and community-based organizations. Facilitating the creation of solidarity networks and avenues of safeguard rooted in the community, the adoption of security protocols, the documentation of cases, and the use of technological tools.
- 7 **Living conditions:** Ensuring that custodians of territories of life can fully exercise their economic, social, and cultural rights, including access to basic services, to protect human dignity and guarantee justice and well-being for them.
- 8 **Participation and consent:** Respecting the self-determination of Peoples and communities and ensuring their effective participation in the comprehensive stewardship of their territories, to prevent the imposition of policies or projects on territories of life—such as fortress conservation or development models—that are inconsistent with ancestral and community relationships.
- 9 **Effective enforcement and access to protection systems:** Ensuring compliance with national and international agreements, regulations, and laws that protect custodians and their territories of life, as well as guaranteeing their access to human rights protection mechanisms.



## Escazú Agreement

The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, known as the Escazú Agreement, commits its state parties to:

- a** ensuring the rights of access to environmental information;
- b** promoting public participation in decision-making;
- c** facilitating access to justice in environmental matters; and
- d** ensuring the protection of environmental defenders.



## Territories of life

ICCAs—territories of life are territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local and Afro-descendant communities, where there exists:

- a** a **living, ongoing** relationship between the custodian communities and their territories;
- b** **self-governance** based on self-determination, cultural and spiritual values, and harmony with nature; and
- c** a living interrelationship that, together with self-determined governance, results in the conservation of nature and the well-being of the community.

## Context, method, and scope

The survey on defenders in territories of life is the result of a partnership between Red Territorios de Vida TICCA Latinoamérica and the LEAD/ALLIED Initiative. It aims to provide evidence about custodians of territories of life and to guide public policies, as well as the decisions and actions of civil society organizations and international bodies.

The survey gathered responses from 55 individuals representing 49 territories of life in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. Conducted between June and August 2025, it aimed to identify threats, risks, and protection mechanisms for environmental defenders.

The instrument employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) was obtained, participants' authorization for information-sharing was secured, and their personal data were protected.

## Custodians of territories of life and Environmental Defenders

The custodians of territories of life, recognized in the Manifesto for Territories of Life by the ICCA Consortium, are Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities who, individually and collectively, preserve the ancestral relationships of care, governance, and cultural continuity over their territories.

These custodians are, in essence, persons, groups, and organizations that promote and defend human rights in environmental matters, as established in Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement. In many cases, they are considered “persons or groups in vulnerable situations”, as defined in Article 2—that is, “those persons or groups that face particular difficulties in fully exercising the access rights recognized.”

The effective implementation of the Agreement provides a legal framework to protect territorial custodianship practices, turning vulnerability in the face of threats into recognized rights and guaranteeing the commitment of state parties.



## Motion 138 of the 2025 IUCN World Conservation Congress

The motion recognizes territories of life as spaces of self-determination and collective conservation, in line with the Convention on Biological Diversity. It calls for initiating processes of truth, reconciliation, and restorative justice; protecting territories of life from extractive activities; and strengthening custodian networks. It also advocates for their recognition as a sui generis “third pathway” for Targets 2 and 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework; both within and outside protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, while respecting FPIC and preserving the relationships rooted in the language and culture of the custodians.

## ALLIED's LEAD initiative

The Leaders Network for Environmental Activists and Defenders (LEAD) initiative, led by the Alliance for Land, Indigenous, and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED), aims to strengthen the recognition, participation, and protection of environmental human rights defenders.



## Data revealed by the survey

The evidence suggests a structural risk for custodians of territories of life, as 95% have felt at risk due to their work (Figure 1). Conflicts are nearly universal; only 8% did not report any, and exposure is worsened by low formal recognition, as 44% of territories lack any state protection mechanism. Even when conflicts are reported, adequate protection is rare: 51% did not receive protection, 14% received it but found it insufficient, and 33% did not request it, often out of fear (Figure 2).

This situation affects different groups

in different ways: women defenders, youth, people with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals are identified as the most vulnerable.

Communities prioritize the following resources: specialized legal support, funding for legal defense, national and international awareness campaigns, community protection, psychological support, access to technology, physical protection, and shelters or relocation (Figure 3).

Consequently, the state's responsibility is clear: it must strengthen

access to justice and redress, take actions against those responsible, ensure prompt responses to reports, establish effective protection mechanisms, and publicly recognize the work of defenders (Figure 4).

All of this must be addressed alongside the information gap regarding the Escazú Agreement: 25.5% of respondents are not familiar with it, 75% call for greater dissemination among communities, and 66% seek a genuine commitment to its implementation.

Figure 1

### Risk perception among custodians of territories of life

Over the past five years, have you felt at risk because of your work defending the environment or your territory?



Figure 2

### Situation after reporting threats or aggression

Did you receive protection or security measures after reporting?

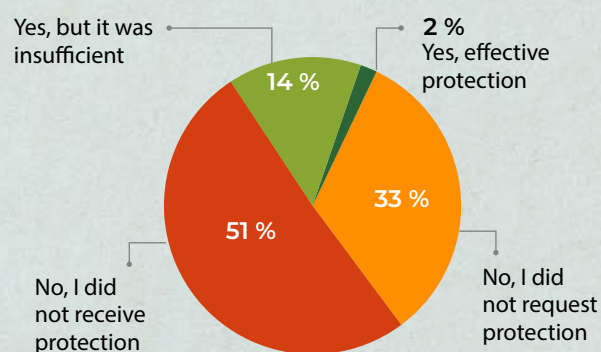


Figure 3

### Priorities identified by defenders (based on multiple-choice question)

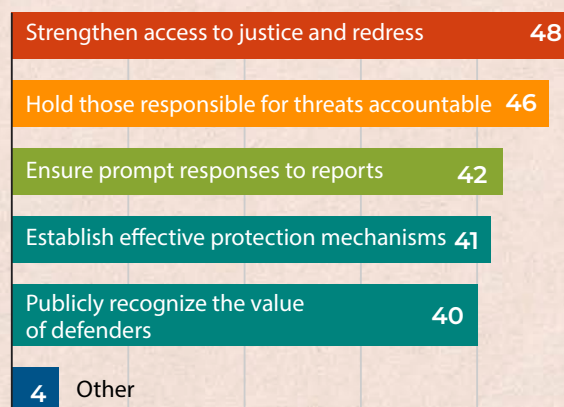
What form of protection do you consider most urgent?



Figure 4

### Priority actions requested (multiple-choice question)

What measures should the state take to provide better protection for environmental defenders?





## Voices from the territories of life

"[...] We want to demonstrate to the international community that, all too often, countries sign agreements like the Escazú Agreement just to improve their public image. In practice, they either fail to respect them, turn a blind eye, or lack the capacity to implement them. Therefore, we aim to urge states to honor the agreements meant to protect the legitimate struggles of territorial leaders in Chile, who safeguard biodiversity, forests, and marine and terrestrial fauna, and people who have traditionally co-existed with the environment, utilizing it sustainably through ancient practices. We believe that all international treaties signed by States must be fully implemented."



**Daniel Caniullán,**  
Mapuche Williche Chona  
Pu Wapi Community of  
Melinka, Chile

"[...] Our struggle began when a company set up a pig farm without the community's consent. At that time, 11 families lived there, dedicating themselves to beekeeping, raising livestock, and growing corn. We filed a complaint with SEMARNAT against the company for cutting down trees and causing extensive deforestation; the company also had a barn with 49,000 pigs. In 2019, the community noticed increasing impacts on beekeeping: the bee population declined, the *cenotes* (water wells) changed color, and drinking from them caused stomachaches [...]. We are facing such a sad situation because neither the state nor the federal governments are taking action [...]. Those who do not work the land are indifferent, but those of us who do are saddened to see that we will have nothing to leave our children if we do not protect it now."



**Matilde Dzib Dzul,**  
Kinchil, Yucatán,  
Mexico

"[...] I am a survivor of the genocide known as the 'Conquest of the Desert.' I am part of a historical struggle to reclaim rights, a collective fight. Our elders always fought for territories that were historically denied, reduced, and forcibly displaced — lands that, at the time, held no value for the State or the ruling elite. [...] Since before 1992, we have been calling on the state to develop public policies for intercultural education and to ensure that public and private education is not used as a tool of colonization or the Spanish-ization of our People, as happened to our ancestors, who were forbidden from speaking their language, practicing their spirituality, using their medicine, and exercising all other aspects of life that define the existence of the Mapuche Nation."



**Pety Piciñam,** Longko  
of the Lof Puel Pujv  
Mapuche Community

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