

# Chapter 13 In Brief

African presence in the Amazon: A glance



Foto: Amazon Conservation Team



**THE AMAZON WE WANT**  
Science Panel for the Amazon

## African presence in the Amazon: A glance

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### Key messages & recommendations

- 1) African enslaved people arrived in the Americas from tropical regions where, for millennia, they managed ecosystems and engaged in agriculture and the domestication of species, which contributed to positive transformations of tropical landscapes in the Americas.
- 2) Some pathways proposed to address the contributions of this commonly overlooked population:
  - a) to promote research vis-à-vis diversity in Afro community territories, ecosystem management, Afro techniques, and environmental management practices and include Afro-Amazonian communities in research endeavors; b) to include Afro-Latin American scholars' contributions for a deeper understanding of the origins and meanings of Afro resilience practices in the region; c) to pay special attention to the Spanish-speaking countries of the basin where research on Afro-Amazonian peoples is very incipient.
- 3) These are unique ecosystem management systems adapted even to the specificities of tropical sub-regions. They use the cycles of nature and are highly dependent on the maintenance of biodiversity. Today, genetic resources, knowledge, and management practices of people of African descent are central to the economies, agricultural production, and cuisine of American societies.
- 4) Consider the Afro-descendant communities from the Amazon region as strategic actors in the conservation of biodiversity, ecosystems, watersheds, tropical rainforest, and sustainable agriculture. Distinct characteristics of the Amazonian population merit a differentiated approach to design appropriate context-specific strategies for conservation. Implement ethnic-racial statistical research and socio-cultural data collection.
- 5) Collective territories of Afro-Amazonian communities and their self-determination processes are central to preserve regions of high importance for biological conservation such as the Amazon. Afro-Latin American communities and social movements should know more about their ancestral history of natural resource management in order to value more their own management practices of complex ecosystems (self-stem and promote new ideas).
- 6) Context-specific conservation strategies should explore and build upon valuable learnings of NGOs when they have accompanied both self-determination and ancestral territories sustainable management of Afro communities.
- 7) There are significant differences between the eastern region and the western region of South America in terms of the perception of the Afro-descendant presence in the Amazon. One reason could be the location of the ports where slave ships disembarked. As opposed to northwestern slave ports, ports in the eastern region have direct access to the Amazon. This difference could explain the greater invisibility of the Afro population in the western countries of South America. However, since colonial times determinism and further political Darwinism influenced all Latin American societies reinforcing racism and stereotypes.
- 8) African descendants face critical situations of violence and forced displacement from ancestral forest territories, which not only violates fundamental rights, but also causes disruption in sustainable tropical forest management systems.
- 9) Greater visibility and recognition of the contributions of African people to the Americas and the role of their tropical forest management systems can help to generate a qualitative change in the perception of the majority society about this population group. In addition, this strategy would be an immense support to Afro social movements.

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**Abstract** This chapter provides evidence on the importance of African descendants in the construction of the Amazon and other tropical areas in the Americas, and highlights their importance for long-lasting sustainable development strategies in the region. It looks at both the cultural exchange and socio-historic perspectives, emphasizing land settlement patterns, natural resources use, and management practices. It focuses mostly on Brazil, Suriname, and Colombia, and emphasizes the importance of involving African descendant peoples in Amazonian academic research and policy.

**Introduction** The presence of peoples of African descent in the Amazon is constantly overlooked. Africans often came from rainforest regions and, like Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, had long-standing knowledge and profound experiences in tropical environments. Today, these can contribute to sustainable practices. Promoting inclusive environmental governance in terms of sustainable management of ancestral territories and strategic economic well-being is crucial<sup>1-5</sup>.

Most studies of African descendants in the Amazon are from non-Spanish speaking countries<sup>3</sup>, which can be explained – among other things – by the places and ports enslaved peoples disembarked. Another explanation for the invisibility of Afro-descendants' role in shaping the Amazon are the deterministic constructs and stereotypes that revolve around African presence in the Americas, including the fallacy that Afro-descendant peoples have only contributed unskilled labor<sup>6-9</sup>. Another construct involves the relationship between urban Latin American societies and nature, which was customarily considered unproductive. In this sense, forest inhabitants were deemed as savages, lazy, and unable to convert forests into productive developed areas. Finally, both Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples in the Americas are erroneously portrayed as peoples without their own history and capacity for action.

**Slave traffic, ports of arrival, and Amazonian entry** It is estimated that, over the course of the four hundred year history of the African slave trade,

80,000 trips were made and approximately 12.5 million people were transported across the Atlantic<sup>10</sup>. By the time surviving slaves arrived at their final destination, they had already faced abuses of all kinds<sup>11</sup>.

Europeans, mostly from Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, kidnapped their human merchandise from West Africa, along what they called “the Slave Coast.” Ports were mostly located in modern-day Guinea, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and Angola. The main purpose of slavery was to drive the economy of the New World<sup>10,12</sup> by transporting different ethnic groups with specific knowledge, culture, and spirituality to the Americas. Slave ships were also provisioned along the West Coast of Africa, which featured a wide diversity of plants and animal species, including rice, coffee, okra, sesame, and kola nut<sup>13-18</sup>.

**Advancing within South America** The Spanish crown advanced along the North-Western and Western regions of South America, but its advance towards the Amazon was not as decisive and direct as the advance made by the Portuguese in Brazil<sup>19</sup> (see Chapter 9).

*Colombia and Panama: Indirect arrival in the Amazon* Although very vaguely, African descendants are mentioned as part of expeditions aimed at conquering the region to the east of the Andes mountains in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to open the forest to exploitation, including gold exploration. One important route for the transport of enslaved Africans and merchandise to South America was from the ports of Cartagena de Indias, Portobello, Guayaquil, and Lima<sup>20,21</sup>. By mid-17th century, Cartagena de Indias was the main slave port for all of Hispanic America<sup>21</sup>, receiving slaves that belonged to the Ararats, Lucumí, Zape,

Angola, Congo, Viafara, Cambindo, Matambas, Carabalí, and Popó ethnic groups. According to Romero (2017)<sup>12</sup>, Africans kept the names of their ethnic groups and places of origin as surnames. Many enslaved people established Maroon societies in the Amazon, but first, they had to cross the Andes mountains



**Figure 13.1** Biodiversity and culinary practices in an Afro-descendant community forest territory in the Colombian Pacific region. Afro-Pacific groups have migrated to the Colombian Amazon at different times seeking livelihood alternatives and freedom. A) an inventory of plant species and their spatial distribution in an Afro family food plot; B) 21 different dishes and utensils that are woven or made in the Bubuey community of the Negros en Acción Community Council. Photo credits: Martha Rosero-Peña. Convenio SENA-Tropenbos, Colombia.

*Brazil and Suriname: Direct arrival in the Amazon* Africans destined for Brazil came from several regions of the West Coast of Africa including Senegambia, West-Central Africa, Bahía Santa Helena, and the Gulf of Benin; as well as Southeast Africa, especially Mozambique<sup>22</sup>. The ports of Benguela and Luanda extended the Angola route, and were created explicitly for the sale of Africans sent to America<sup>23–25</sup>.

During the colonial period, slave ships arrived at the ports of Bahia and Pernambuco, far from the Amazon. Some arrivals were destined for work on coastal sugar plantations, while others were transported to the interior; escaped slaves from both areas often took refuge in the heart of the jungle. Although extractive activities were of minor importance to the national economy, they were the basis of the Amazonian economy, and African slaves were fundamental for these operations. In Brazil, the Portuguese Overseas Council officially defined the settlements of fugitive enslaved Africans as *Quilombos*. The *Quilombos* established local relationships with Indigenous peoples, local communities, and merchants<sup>26,27</sup>, and eventually became home to Indigenous individuals, mulattoes, caboclos, runaway soldiers, and other marginalized groups. In the

mid-19th century, the rubber boom (see Chapter 11) increased the need for slave labor, but in 1869, the Brazilian state of Pará demanded the emancipation of all people from servile work. Finally, in 1888 the Golden Law was issued, which abolished slavery in Brazil<sup>28,29</sup>.

By the mid-1600s, the Dutch established their colony in the northeast area of South America. Between 1668 and 1823, an estimated 300,000 Africans arrived in Suriname as slaves, from the region between southern Gabon and northern Angola, including Ghana and Benin. It is said that the limitless cruelty of the Dutch slave masters caused many slaves to escape and take refuge in the dense Amazon Forest, establishing Maroon communities along the region's rivers.

In 1863, Suriname abolished slavery, after which former slaves from coastal plantations settled mostly in the capital Paramaribo. Today, over 72,000 descendants inhabit 6 semi-independent Maroon communities<sup>30</sup>. Suriname is considered one of the world's most ethnically and culturally diverse places.

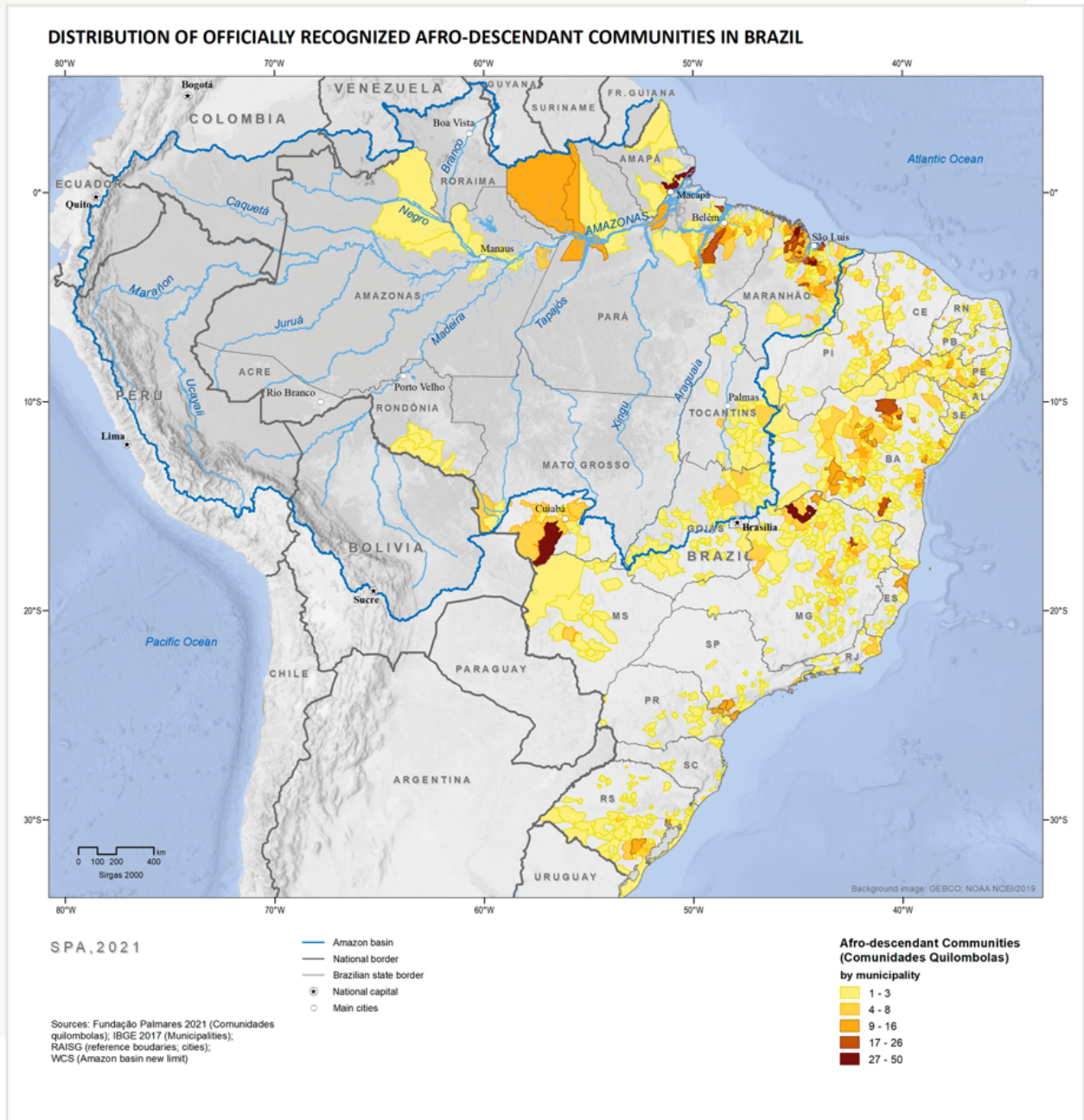


Figure 13.2. Afro-descendant communities legally recognized in Brazil <sup>31,32,33,34</sup>.

**The importance of tropical origin to adaptation in the Americas** When the Portuguese arrived in West

Africa in 1443, the Indigenous peoples they encountered had, over millennia, developed complex cul-

tural and agricultural structures. They had domesticated many species known to the world today, and had livelihoods and extractive systems based on the diversity of Africa's tropical ecosystems<sup>14,17,35,36</sup>. Coming from a tropical zone was a great advantage for Africans' adaptation and resilience in the American tropics, supporting both enslaved people and the thousands who fled and formed settlements deep in the forest<sup>37</sup>.

Many contemporary economic activities in the American tropics are foreign to this continent, including livestock operations originally from Europe, Africa, and Asia<sup>14,38-40</sup>. Africans not only domesticated plants, but have traditionally been pastoralists<sup>41</sup>. African knowledge of tropical ecosystems management would have been crucial to adapting imported plant and animal species to South America, refuting the widespread belief that European ingenuity developed these techniques<sup>7,8,14</sup>.

**Agro-ecosystems of Maroon and plantation slaves: The transformation of rainforests into food forests** The African legacy in the Americas can be traced to agro-biodiversity, agricultural techniques including seed management and species' adaptation to new environments, and culinary practices<sup>14,42</sup>. West African food staples brought on slave ships became the basis of Maroon subsistence agriculture in the New World, and the survival of these communities depended on their skills in obtaining food from new environments<sup>21,43</sup>.

Both plantation slaves and run-away Maroons depended on their own botanical knowledge of medicinal, religious, and nutritional plants to survive<sup>44,45</sup>, and this heritage is reflected in the subsistence practices of the groups that still inhabit tropical forests<sup>17</sup>. The multi-cropping systems of many communities from the African tropical belt have transformed the rainforest into a food forest, incorporating Amerindian staples such as corn, sweet potatoes, cassava, and peanuts<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the extreme conditions of subjugation and exclusion, the peoples of African origin adapted solid agrarian systems to the New World based on

knowledge constructed in the African tropics over millennia and the contribution of the indigenous knowledge from the Americas<sup>37</sup>. Prominent scientists consider agro-food systems of Afro-descendants as biocultural refuges that facilitate positive landscape transformations, especially in tropical rainforests<sup>37,46</sup>. The inherited production systems of freed African peoples use space in ways that combine various livelihood strategies in diverse ecosystems and trade with local towns<sup>47</sup>.

**African culinary and livelihood practices in tropical areas in the Americas** African foods and ingredients from ecosystems remain vital to the diaspora's culinary practices and American recipes. In tropical areas of the Americas, there is a strong relationship between Afro-women, agriculture, food parcels, livelihood activities, ecosystems, and cooking<sup>42,49</sup>, which may have preserved and passed down African culinary practices.

Culinary practices of African people in the diaspora led to the preservation of dishes from Africa in the Americas. As suggested by Zabala Gómez (2017)<sup>42</sup>, Afro-Kitchen is a social, cultural, symbolic, physical, and geographical space that, unlike others, was not persecuted by slave owners. Therefore, it is crucial to trace culture and culinary tradition in Afro-Amazonian contexts since these resilience strategies are closely related to biodiversity and ecosystem management.

**The Afro-Latin American contribution to Africa** In addition to African contributions to the Americas, the Americas have also contributed to contemporary Africa. Over centuries people, merchandise, culture, genetic material, and ideas traveled back and forth on ships between the Slave Coast and Brazil<sup>25,50,51</sup>. Crops domesticated in the Americas, including cassava and maize, were brought to Africa and became staples of African diets. After slavery was abolished, the Brazilian diaspora emerged in Africa, mainly Angola, with a cultural exchange led by hundreds of freed slaves who remained commercially, culturally, and intellectually connected to relatives and acquaintances who stayed in Brazil. It is

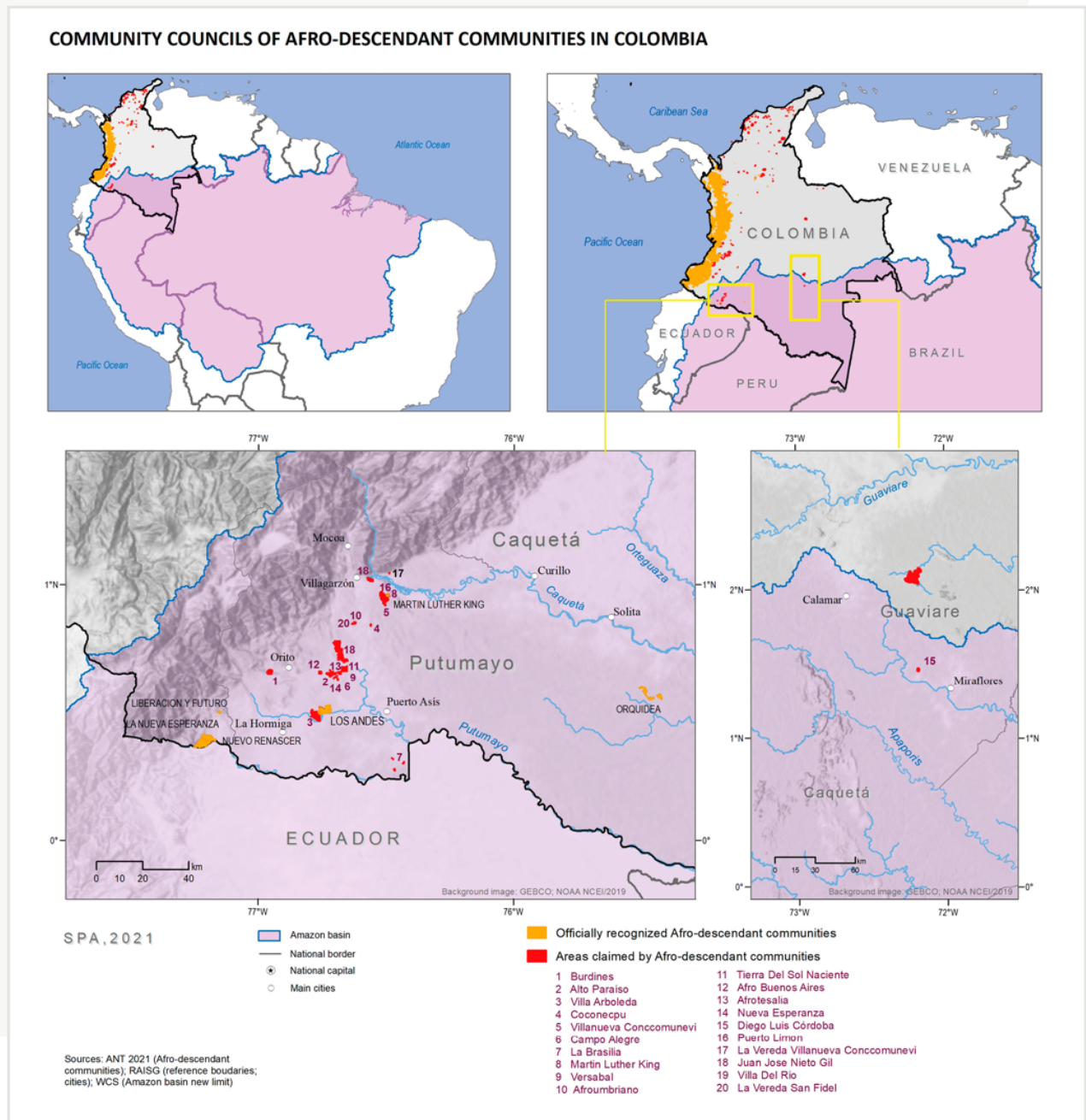


Figure 13.3 Afro-descendant communities legally recognized in Colombia<sup>33,34,48</sup>.

reported that some sent money back to Brazil to purchase their children's freedom.

**Post-abolition positive transformations of tropical landscapes** During the period of slavery, agro-diversity and multilayer systems were characteristic of resilience strategies, either by working on

plantations or fleeing as maroons. After the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African descendants carried out positive transformations and changes to the territories and ecosystems they have ancestrally inhabited, with minimal adverse consequences on the environment<sup>22,37,46,52</sup>. The abolition of slavery introduced Afro-descendant people into a market economy without the just and necessary means to navigate the new system. So, forests and ecosystems helped Afro-descendant people once again, providing these populations with the alternative of making a living and supporting families based on the management of natural resources. This contrasts with the extensive plantation and livestock systems implemented by European descendants and *Criollo* people to boost economic interests at the expense of ecosystems, with immense consequences<sup>46</sup>.

Currently, Afro-descendant communities in countries such as Brazil and Colombia have made significant progress in titling lands they have ancestrally inhabited. This is a significant step, especially given the economic difficulties faced by Afro-communities in the post-abolition period.

Nevertheless, these groups still face tremendous difficulties. In Colombia, for example, the incursion of armed groups and related clashes over the drug trade has generated massive forced displacement, conscription of youth, violence, and anxiety<sup>53–55</sup>. In addition, oil palm plantations are expanding at the expense of Colombian Pacific forests<sup>37</sup>. After the signing of the peace accords in 2016, there was a period of relative tranquility in Colombia that lasted about a year. However, cessation of the armed conflict resulted in the incursion of extractive interests into the Amazon, which led to deforestation, land grabbing, unsustainable resource use and continued violence towards Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

**Conclusions** A commonly neglected topic has been the fact that African enslaved people arrived in the Americas from tropical regions where domestication of species, agriculture, and management of ecosystems had already taken place for millennia. This

is reflected in the large number of species of flora and fauna that can be found today in the gastronomy, culture, and economy of Latin America. Prominent academics draw attention to the importance of human adaptation strategies of Afro-descendants to tropical rainforest in the positive transformation of such landscapes in the Americas. However, there are complex agronomic arrangements in both domestic and agricultural systems; agrobiodiversity and plant management practices that support polyculture food crops are gradually being replaced by new waves of monoculture plantations. The history of African descent in tropical and subtropical rainforests of the Americas provide clues to navigate uncertainties and strengthen resilience. It simultaneously shows possible paths to ensure the well-being and conservation of nature while at the same time working towards the establishment of a new development model in the Amazon based on a potent bioeconomy.

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