

Peer Insights

R E P O R T

Q&A with Niyanta Spelman of Rainforest Partnership CEO

Principle Series:

Rainforest Partnership is an international nonprofit organization that protects tropical rainforests. It does this working directly with local and indigenous communities in the Amazon and beyond to create sustainable economies and protected areas. Founded in 2007, Rainforest Partnership has helped nearly 50 rainforest communities protect over 850,000 acres of tropical forest in Ecuador and Peru. Rainforest Partnership uses an integrated approach that leverages partnerships with all levels of government, NGOs, communities, and businesses.

As part of its global efforts, Rainforest Partnership engages audiences on six continents through: World Rainforest Day, June 22nd, an annual day of collaborative action and engagement that Rainforest Partnership launched in 2017, and Films for the Forest, an annual international short film competition launched in 2010 with winning films screened as part of SXSW Community Screening and beyond.



Family Office Insights is a voluntary, “opt-in” collaborative peer-to-peer community of single family offices, qualified investors and institutional investors. Join the community here www.familyofficeinsights.com

Why focus on tropical rainforests and why now?

"Tropical rainforests cover less than 3% of the surface area of our planet, yet they play a disproportionate and vital role in the regulation of our global climate. They help regulate the global water cycle, circulate oxygen and hold 50% of our planet's biodiversity. Rainforests also absorb and store large amounts of CO₂.

Having lost half our rainforests in my lifetime, deforestation continues to devastate biodiversity, indigenous and local communities, and is accelerating climate change. Humanity faces an urgency to find lasting solutions. Fortunately, we've found that by partnering with local and indigenous communities of the Amazon — the people that have both a stake in the health of the rainforest and a deep knowledge of the rainforest — we can create sustainable livelihoods that also ensure a healthy, thriving rainforest. Investing in rainforests is one of the most efficient, effective and essential ways to secure our future, our children's future, and the future of all life on this planet.

Why now? Scientists tell us we have about a decade to act to prevent catastrophic consequences for humanity and life as we know it. The public is only now catching up. The news of the Amazon fires going mainstream in August 2019 raised global consciousness about both the importance and the ongoing threats that remaining rainforests face. For years we have had the science, solutions and human resources to achieve real results. Strategic investment of funds has been the missing piece.

"

What makes your model special?

"Our model is based on the understanding that deforestation is ultimately an economic problem and that an economic problem needs an economic solution. Quite simply, people cut and burn the trees because they believe the rainforest has less economic value standing than cut. Lumber, mineral extraction, farming, and pasture will return an immediate profit. But slashing and burning removes the potential for other resources with even higher value. Shade-grown coffee and cacao do not require water, pesticides, and fertilizers, but have more distinctive taste (and command higher prices) than when grown on clear-cut plantations. Other goods and services have a role. One of our communities makes a sustainable living through women selling handicrafts and ecotourism. It is also likely that many forest plants have value that has yet to be recognized. For example, medicinal rainforest plants have long been the basis for cancer treatments, but fewer than 1% have been tested in Western labs. This doesn't even include almost all those plants used for generations by indigenous healers. Apart from their environmental value, rainforests have immense economic value that has yet to be harnessed. They lose this value when the trees are cut down or burnt or indigenous knowledge is lost.

Seeing deforestation as an economic problem — as many of our rainforest partner communities see it — has enabled us to respond with effective and enduring

economic solutions that align the strengths of our local and indigenous partner communities with income-generating projects. These partnerships lead to sustainable livelihoods for the communities, healthy rainforest ecosystems, and progress toward a sustainable future. One reason we love this approach is because the communities we work with love it, too. Given the choice and economic opportunity, each community has chosen to maintain and protect its rainforest rather than cut it down. They're motivated by economics, but even more so by a culture that makes the forest an integral part of their lives. This makes the work even more meaningful for us.

It also just makes sense to put the fate of the forest in the hands of people who understand it so well. It's why we focus on education and building capacity of community members to be conservation leaders. Their extensive knowledge of the forest ecosystem makes them the best stewards of this tremendously valuable resource.

Building sustainable forest economies is at the core of our work, but we've learned that achieving long-term conservation requires an integrated approach. That's why our work focuses on every aspect touching conservation: community engagement and empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, conservation science, biodiversity conservation and forest regeneration, conservation management and governance, and global outreach and engagement."

How does Rainforest Partnership's work make an impact on climate change?

"The burning of tropical forests produces around 10% of global carbon emissions. If deforestation were a country, it would rank third in emissions behind the U.S. and China. By stopping deforestation and regenerating rainforests, Rainforest Partnership is actively working to reverse the trend. We're proud to help protect over 850,000 acres across Peru and Ecuador, and we're not stopping there. We have requests for new partnerships and projects on a weekly basis, from communities and governments at various levels. For example, communities covering 18 protected areas in the Amazonas region in Peru, encompassing over 400,000 acres, asked us to help them conserve those areas. In Junin Region in central Peru, we recently partnered with the regional and national government to create land titles for ten communities, the first legal step towards conservation. Through our partnerships, we're able to relieve the burdens that have led to the destructive practices of deforestation which have fueled climate change.

In addition, we believe in leading by example, and we like to think that our model shows others how to support rainforest communities, ecosystems, and the global climate in mutually beneficial ways. As we continue to partner with communities to create sustainable livelihoods and protect the Amazon, we continue to challenge others to partner with us and with rainforest communities.

If what we are doing speaks to you, if you want to learn more, if you want to fund the work we do, or if you just want to experience the beauty and the magic of the Amazon and become an ambassador for rainforests, please reach out to us. My team and I, and our partner communities, would love to share and show you how economic solutions lead to thriving communities and ecosystems. Your children, the forests and the planet will thank you! "



Niyanta Spelman of Rainforest Partnership

Niyanta Spelman is the founder and CEO of Rainforest Partnership, a US headquartered international non-profit that achieves results in rainforest protection. Rainforest Partnership works with local and indigenous communities to take economic incentives out of deforestation by understanding that economic problems demand economic responses.

A winding path took Niyanta from Tanzania to India, the UK, and finally to Texas. Her work spans continents with over three decades of experience working in government and the private sector, including environmental and state agencies, London's first lobbying firm, running a management consultancy, serving on non-profit boards (local, state, national), and leading a chamber of commerce.

An inspirational, visionary leader, Niyanta leads a dedicated and diverse global team in fulfilling Rainforest Partnership's mission to protect tropical rainforests.

Niyanta@RainforestPartnership.org

RainforestPartnership.org