

Health

Scientists catalog the Amazon's genetic wealth

TORONTO: In a bid to stop “biopiracy”, researchers are building a giant database to catalog genetic material from the world’s largest rainforest. From the rubber in car tires, to cosmetics and medicines, genetic material contained in the Amazon region has contributed to discoveries worth billions of dollars. Communities living there, however, have rarely benefited from the genetic wealth extracted from their land - a form of theft that legal experts call “biopiracy”.

Instead, forest-dwellers often remain impoverished, which can drive them to find other ways to make money, such as illegal logging, according to Dominic Waughray, who heads the Amazon Bank of Codes project for the World Economic Forum. “At the heart of the conservation debate is: how do you find a way for a person in the forest to get more

cash in their hand right now from preserving that habitat rather than cutting it down?” said Waughray.

One solution involves compelling investors to pay royalties to local communities when using genetic sequences from organisms extracted from the forest, he said. The Amazon Bank of Codes will facilitate those payments.

But first those genetic sequences need to be mapped and stored online, which is what the project backers aim to do as early as 2020. Smart phones and digital payment tools will make it possible for outside investors to directly pay local residents to use genetic material extracted from their land, Waughray said.

Spread across nine countries, including Brazil, Colombia and Peru, the Amazon is home to one in 10 known species on earth,

according to the World Wildlife Fund, a conservation group.

That makes the region vulnerable to biopiracy, which is the unlawful appropriation or commercial use of biological materials native to a particular country without providing fair financial compensation to its people or government. “The history of biopiracy runs deep in the Amazon basin,” Waughray said, citing early colonialists taking rubber trees from the region to create lucrative plantations in Malaysia.

In a more recent case, Brazilian prosecutors launched an investigation into a California-based company earlier this year, accusing it of using genetic components of the tropical acai berry in its nutritional supplements without paying for them.

Pharmaceutical companies have also used

the yellow-and-green Kambo frog to create anti-inflammatory drugs without distributing benefits to local residents, Brazil’s environmental enforcement agency said in 2011.

In India, attempts to patent products such as basmati rice and properties of the spice turmeric, for medical use, have sparked protests.

“The phenomenon has given rise to a huge outcry to have a more ethical approach to the use of biological resources,” said Ikechi Mgbeoji, a professor of intellectual property law at Toronto’s York University.

Internationally, the Nagoya Protocol, which came into force in 2014, governs how companies and researchers should equitably share benefits from genetic material, said Valerie Normand, an official from the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. — Reuters

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