Rainforest Foundation Magazine

By: Divinity Braboy-Dorsey

Goals/Objectives

- Raise awareness of Rainforest Foundation
- Attract new curious readers
- Inspire action and support
- Educate in a fun and visual way
- Design for print + digital use
- Build a format for future issues

ReClaim

The Voices of the Amazon

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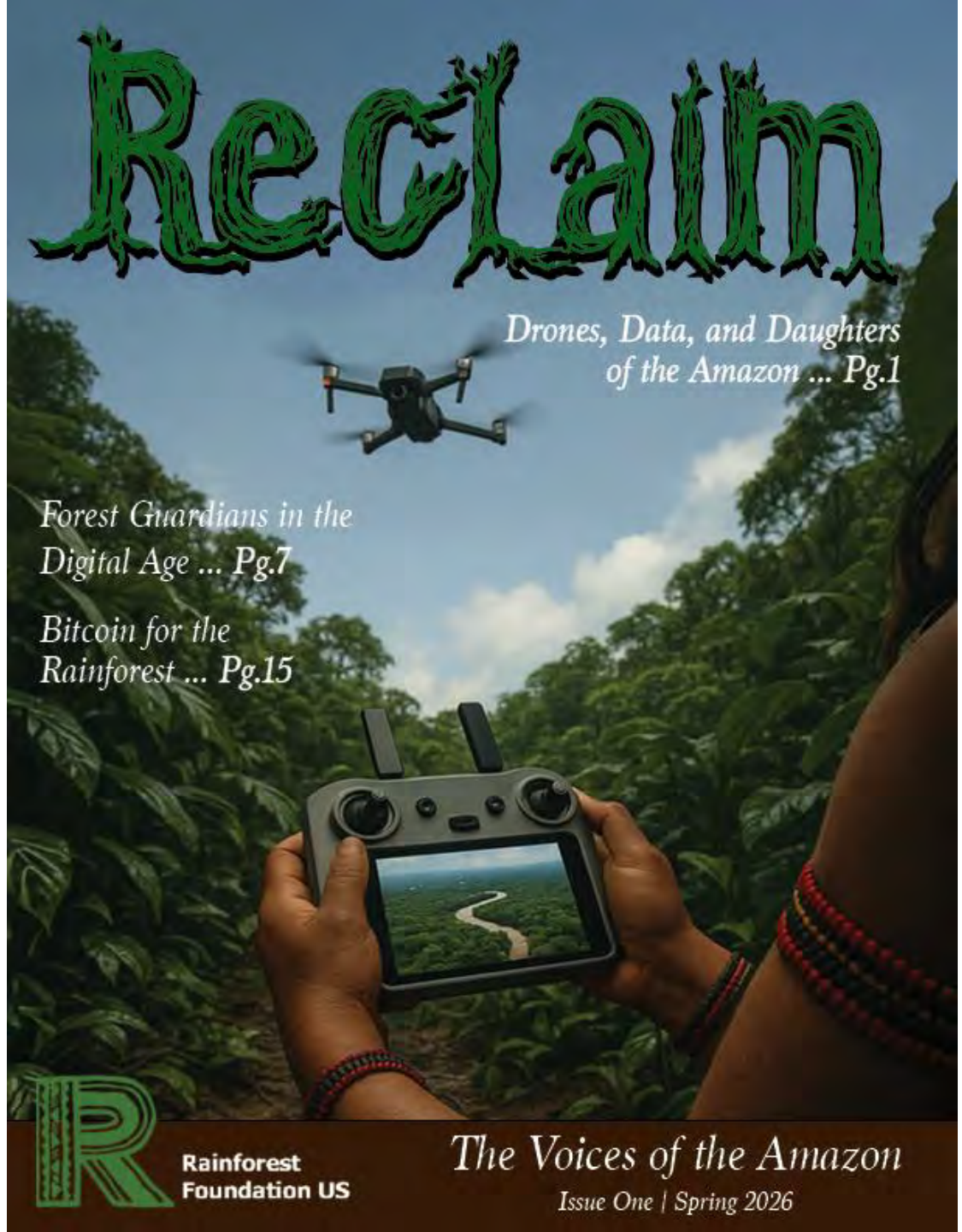

Rainforest Foundation US

The Voices of the Amazon

Issue One | Spring 2026

Drones Data Daughters of the Amazon

In 2017, when Betty Rubio began patrolling the forests of her ancestral land, she began to question why she was doing it. It wasn't easy. She knew that tackling environmental crimes such as illegal logging and mining came with risks, and that as a woman, those risks were even greater. "My children would say to me, 'Mom, you're fighting for things that aren't yours. Who's going to thank you? You're the only one doing it, and no one else is saying anything,'" the Kichwa forest ranger recalls.

But Rubio is clear that the purpose was bigger than herself. It was about protecting food, ancestral medicines and the future, not only for Puerto Arica, her community, but also for many others living along the Napo River Basin in Loreto, the Amazonian region bordering Peru and Ecuador.

At the time, she was one of only three forest monitors from her community — the other two were men — who helped launch the monitoring project led by the Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of the Eastern Amazon (known by its Spanish-language acronym, ORPIO), with support from the Rainforest Foundation US (RFUS). Since then, women have stepped into leadership roles in what was once considered an exclusively male field.

Today, alongside Rubio, more than 30 women have forged new paths through the Amazon Rainforest.

"It's always been thought that this work could only be done by men — that they're the ones who can handle the technology, that they can go into the forest and stay there longer," Rubio explains. "But we've shown that women can do it too. We have the same ability to use the technology. For example, we have flown drones to reduce risks."

Rubio played a key role in encouraging more women to join the forest monitoring effort. After being trained as a monitor in September 2017, learning how to use GPS devices and mobile apps to document patrol routes with photos and videos, she quickly went on, in early 2018, to train dozens of Indigenous monitors in using technological tools to map their territory.

That same year, Rubio achieved something unprecedented: She was elected as the first female president of the Federation of Native Communities of Medio Napo, Curaray and Arabela (Feconamncua) in the province of Maynas, in the Loreto region. After completing her term, she returned to forest monitoring. Today, she works as an Indigenous specialist in technology transfer and advocates for affirmative action to promote gender equality, ensuring that more women can actively participate in the control and surveillance of their territories.

"Empowering women has been very important to us," Rubio adds. "It's also important that they can take part in decision-making during community assemblies, because sometimes women haven't been included. I don't want it to be just one woman doing this work; I want there to be more of us, so we can show that women care deeply about what is happening to our territories, our rivers and our cochas [lagoons or flooded lowlands in the Amazon, formed by rivers]. The more women there are, the stronger we become."

After almost eight years of work, the forest monitors have greatly expanded their reach. "We now protect some 1 million hectares [2.4 million acres] in the Napo River Basin," Rubio says proudly.

Monitoring the forest

Since the launch of Rainforest Alert, RFUS's forest monitoring program, the number of Kichwa, Ticuna and Matsés women involved has grown from just three to 34 — including monitors, trainers and project coordinators like Rubio — out of a total of 236 participants.

"I hope that in a few years, we will have a study showing how the inclusion of more women helps keep more forests standing. I am sure that day will come," says Wendy Pineda, project manager for RFUS in Peru. "But I can already say, with great pride, that the program now has almost 15% female participation. People ask me why it isn't 50%, but when we started, it was only 1%. It's taken a lot to reach this point."

This shift, though considered slow by some, has been steady and sustainable over time, says Pineda, and she says she believes it will eventually become exponential. "Because while before we only had one Betty who could train two or three women, now we have a significant number of female monitors, almost all of whom are in a position to train others," she explains.

In 2019, a study led by researchers at Columbia University showed that community monitoring, when combined with technology, can be a

powerful tool for curbing deforestation in the Amazon. The analysis, which focused on communities in Loreto, found that the active involvement of local populations in forest surveillance makes a measurable difference. Then, in July 2021, another study reinforced these findings: Communities that received satellite deforestation alerts via smartphones were able to reduce forest loss by 52% in the first year, compared with those that did not adopt the technology. In the second year, the reduction was an additional 21%.

"This result was very significant for us because it proved the importance of investing in territories and communities — and of being able to measure impact," Pineda says. "The academic community was able to confirm what we were already seeing: If we provide Indigenous peoples with the right tools and resources, they can increase forest protection with clear, tangible results."

The strength of women's planning

To carry out forest patrols, the monitors must first organize a work plan. Depending on their objective, they prioritize certain areas over others, then check that all their equipment is fully charged and ready to accompany them on long journeys on foot. "Sometimes we walk for hours ... so we also have to make sure the weather is good, so we don't take unnecessary risks in the forest and can find our way to our destination," Rubio says.

Once on site, they collect photos, videos, audio recordings and GPS coordinates, all of which are documented using tools like Forest Watcher, a smartphone app designed to work with the dynamic monitoring and early warning systems for deforestation developed by Global Forest Watch (GFW), a satellite-based forest monitoring platform. Rainforest Alert combines this satellite data with on-the-ground fieldwork to verify evidence of deforestation.

"We document our findings so we have the information ready to present it first to the community," Rubio explains. "Depending on what we find, we then report it to our organization — whether local or regional."

These activities are part of a broader plan developed in collaboration with elders from Indigenous communities in the Napo River Basin. The goal of the monitoring program is to address three key challenges: achieving physical, political and intellectual control of the territory. To support these pillars, different branches of the initiative were created, and over time, women have been increasingly integrated into all areas of the effort.

"When women are able to work alongside men in developing physical control of the territory, it opens up political space for them," Pineda explains. "Now, Indigenous women bring important data and information to the community assembly. Monitoring has opened the door to a space that was previously uncomfortable for them, where they weren't necessarily participating. Now they have something to contribute — facts and figures about the threats we face. They are moving forward, and they are becoming an extra set of eyes for the men."

In the past, women were seen by other monitors primarily as cooks, with their involvement rarely going beyond that role. But over time, and thanks to the persistence of their female colleagues, even the Apus, traditional leaders or community authorities, have come to recognize that women tend to be more organized when presenting monitoring information to the assemblies.

"So now they see that it's not just about equal participation — there's growing recognition that women bring something different to monitoring systems that have traditionally been led by men," Pineda adds. "We're already seeing changes in the mindset of individual men, of groups and even families. Now they see women flying drones, walking 20 kilometers [12 miles] and coming back with evidence of illegal logging. They also see women leading anti-corruption movements within their own communities."

Rubio recalls a time when a team of forest monitors, comprising five men and one woman, from two communities joined forces to remove pequedragas, small wooden boats equipped with platforms and machinery, used to illegally extract gold from the river.

"The miners tried to bribe the male monitors. But the female monitor told them, 'We didn't come here to take money from the mining company; we came to do our job as monitors. And if you accept, I will report you along with the miners,'" Rubio recounts. "That decision by our colleague stopped the others from becoming complicit and allowed them to keep defending the territory."

The future of the forest

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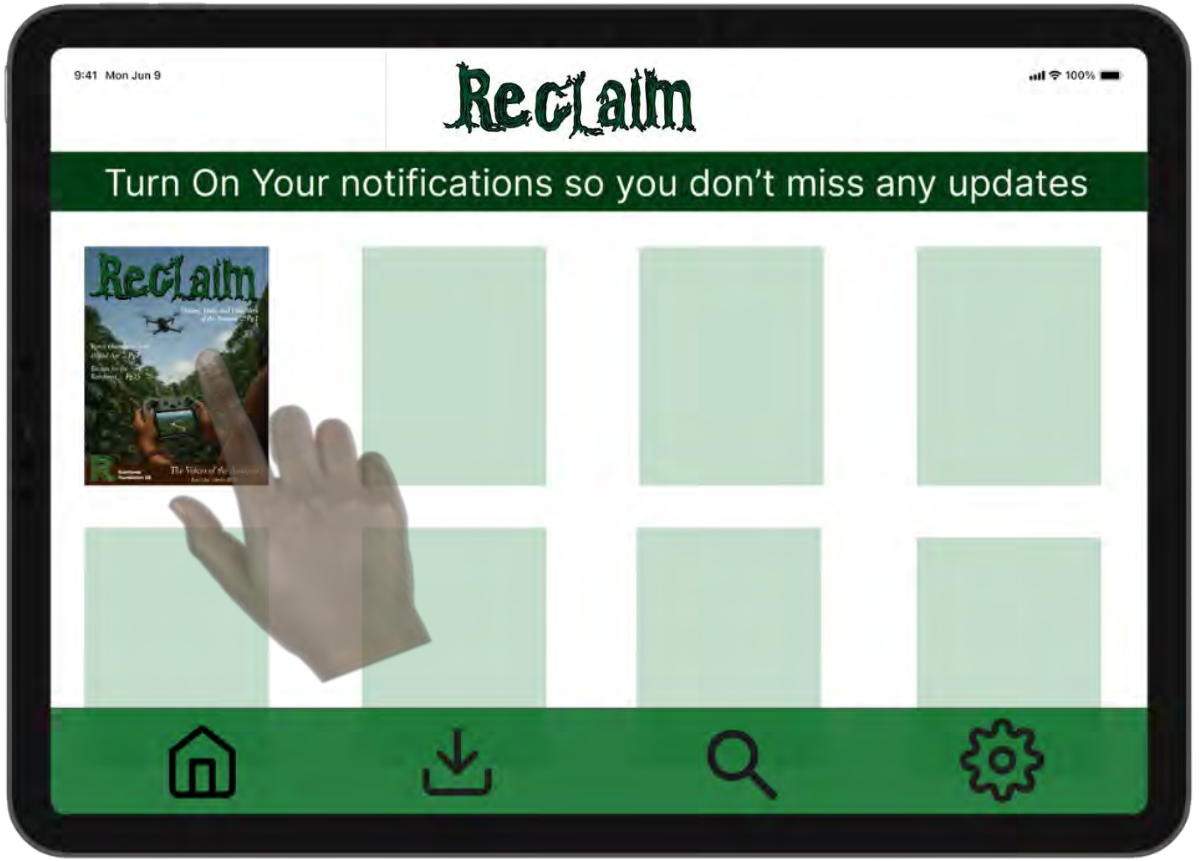

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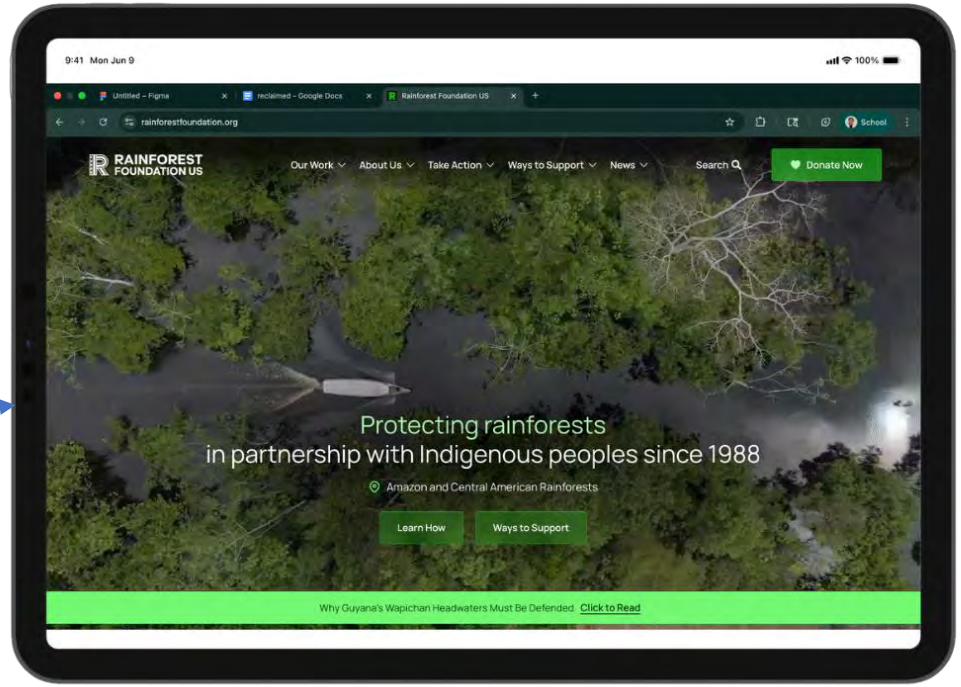

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