



June 1, 2012

### **Indigenous lands to receive titles in Panama**

The Wounaan communities of Puerto Lara and Caña Blanca, in the Darién of Panama, will receive their collective land titles on Monday June 4th, following a thirty-year struggle to have their lands officially recognized. This is a historic event and an important victory for the Wounaan and the Emberá of Eastern Panama, who have fought for years to secure official rights to their lands. Over 600 people are expected to attend the ceremonies in Puerto Lara on Monday, which will include the official hand-over of the titles and traditional dances.

Panama has five *comarcas* – large, semi-autonomous indigenous lands. The comarca system, however, left tens of thousands of indigenous people without any form of title to their traditional lands, opening the way for invasions by ranchers and loggers. This includes 32 collective lands in Eastern Panama, which were left out of the Emberá Wounaan Comarca when it was created in 1983. Since then, the Emberá and Wounaan have fought for recognition of their lands, and in 2008, Law 72 was passed, allowing for the titling of collective indigenous lands. In 2010, enabling legislation was passed, setting forth the process for obtaining those titles.

The Wounaan communities of Puerto Lara and Caña Blanca will become the very first communities to receive their titles under Law 72. They will also be the first indigenous lands titled in Panama since 2000. In its announcement, the Wounaan National Congress stated: “On June 4<sup>th</sup> we will celebrate the titling of two Wounaan collective lands. However, we see this as a beginning: a beginning for these two communities, who will now be able to develop and live in peace on their lands; but also for the rest of the Wounaan and Emberá communities, who still seek official recognition of their collective lands.”

Twelve Wounaan communities – including Puerto Lara and Caña Blanca – numbering about 7,000 people and covering some 470,000 acres, have never held formal legal title to their lands. Some have been invaded by outsiders, who have cleared the forest for cattle-raising, agriculture, and other development projects. Despite these threats, the lands claimed by the communities include significant swaths of largely untouched rainforest, some of the most intact mangrove and lowland forest ecosystems in Panama, and ecologically important rivers and estuaries.

For twenty-three years, the Rainforest Foundation has worked with indigenous peoples to secure their rights to their lands and resources. Over the years, the Rainforest Foundation US has supported some of the main indigenous land rights campaigns in South and Central America, providing funding and hands-on advocacy. RF-US works closely with the Wounaan National Congress, and is proud to share in announcing the titles to be awarded on Monday.

#### **More information:**

<http://www.rainforestfoundation.org/protecting-470000-acres-panama>