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How Human Values shape Land Use Attitudes in the Southwestern Amazon: A Cross-Country Comparison

Forest loss in the Southwestern Amazon arises primarily through significant land use change. Existing research on land use change has largely emphasized structural drivers, including agricultural expansion and cattle ranching, as well as broader institutional and socio-economic conditions. However, little attention has been paid to the inner sphere and cognitive processes underlying land use decisions among rural populations. This is of concern because personal values and views are not merely subjective impressions, but they influence everyday practices and behaviors. The transboundary MAP region—encompassing Madre de Dios in Peru, Acre in Brazil, and Pando in Bolivia—offers an insightful comparative setting, as neighboring areas share similar ecological conditions but differ substantially in dominant livelihood strategies. Against this background, this study draws on concepts from social and environmental psychology, particularly Schwartz Value Theory. Within this framework, the inner sphere is understood as a cognitive hierarchy in which human values provide the foundation for beliefs, which shape attitudes and ultimately guide behavior. Accordingly, this study investigates how human values shape attitudes toward different land use types in the MAP region.

Applying a mixed-methods approach, the study combines baseline household data from 2022 with new primary data collected during three months of fieldwork between July and October 2024, including a value–attitude survey with rural dwellers ($n = 171$) and key informant interviews with community leaders, experienced long-term residents, and representatives from relevant livelihood sectors ($n = 9$). The quantitative analysis focuses on ordered logit and binomial regression models, while the qualitative insights provide complementary context to interpret patterns and trends observed in the survey data. The findings indicate that, overall, respondents in the MAP region place slightly greater emphasis on Self-Transcendence and Conservatism values compared to Self-Enhancement and Openness to Change values. Higher Self-Transcendence is associated with a stronger, whereas higher Conservatism is linked to a weaker pro-forest attitude. Cross-country comparisons show that value orientations are largely similar across the three countries, with only minor differences. This suggests that differences in livelihood strategies cannot be explained by value orientations and attitudes alone, as they also emerge from broader socio-economic, historical, and institutional contexts. To design more effective sustainable land use strategies, policy-makers and organizations should build on Self-Transcendence by aligning communication and extension strategies with values related to environmental stewardship, community well-being, and concern for future generations. At the same time, they should acknowledge that Conservatism may influence perceptions of risk and uncertainty associated with adopting novel practices such as agroforestry or silvopastoralism.