



# FOSSIL FREE ZONES



# IN SANTA MARTA

An immediate opportunity for countries to advance a just and orderly transition away from fossil fuels by protecting “Life Zones” critical to nature and people





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Fossil Free Zones (FFZs) are intentionally geographically defined areas permanently protected from fossil fuel exploration, extraction, and related infrastructure development due to their ecological, biodiversity, cultural, or socio-economic importance. Rather than continuing to extract fossil fuels and other resources from these territories, governments should instead perceive their value as true “life zones” that sustain human well-being, biodiversity and ecosystem services. Evidence indicates that continued expansion of fossil fuel frontiers in sensitive ecosystems risks stranded assets, accelerates deforestation and biodiversity loss, undermines Indigenous rights, while generating limited long-term benefits for national energy security.

FFZs offer governments a practical, territorial, place-based policy tool to align climate, biodiversity, and development objectives, demonstrating their commitment to transition away from fossil fuels and building trust in their willingness to align the energy transition with human rights and environmental protection. They also help avoid negative economic outcomes from stranded assets and future arbitration disputes.

Recent policy actions, including Colombia’s nationwide ban on fossil fuel extraction in its Amazon region, demonstrate growing political momentum for FFZs.

Establishing FFZs can help advance a just and orderly transition away from fossil fuels as well as safeguard climate-relevant ecosystems, reduce financial and reputational risks, and enable regenerative economic opportunities such as agroecology, bioeconomy and nature-based tourism that could trigger a robust standing forest economy and community development. The convergence of international policy processes in 2026, including the UNFCCC [COP30 fossil fuel and deforestation roadmaps](#), the [First Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels](#), and the [Global Review under the Convention on Biological Diversity](#), creates a unique window for coordinated action.

Hence, governments meeting at the [First Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels](#) in Santa Marta, Colombia, have a crucial opportunity to elevate FFZs as a critical tool to advance a just energy transition while protecting critical ecosystems and Indigenous Peoples and local communities’ rights. Integrating FFZs into national transition roadmaps can overcome inertia and generate momentum towards concrete implementation of international commitments to transition away from fossil fuels, halt and reverse deforestation and effectively conserve at least 30% of land, waters and seas.



## FOSSIL FREE ZONES (FFZS)

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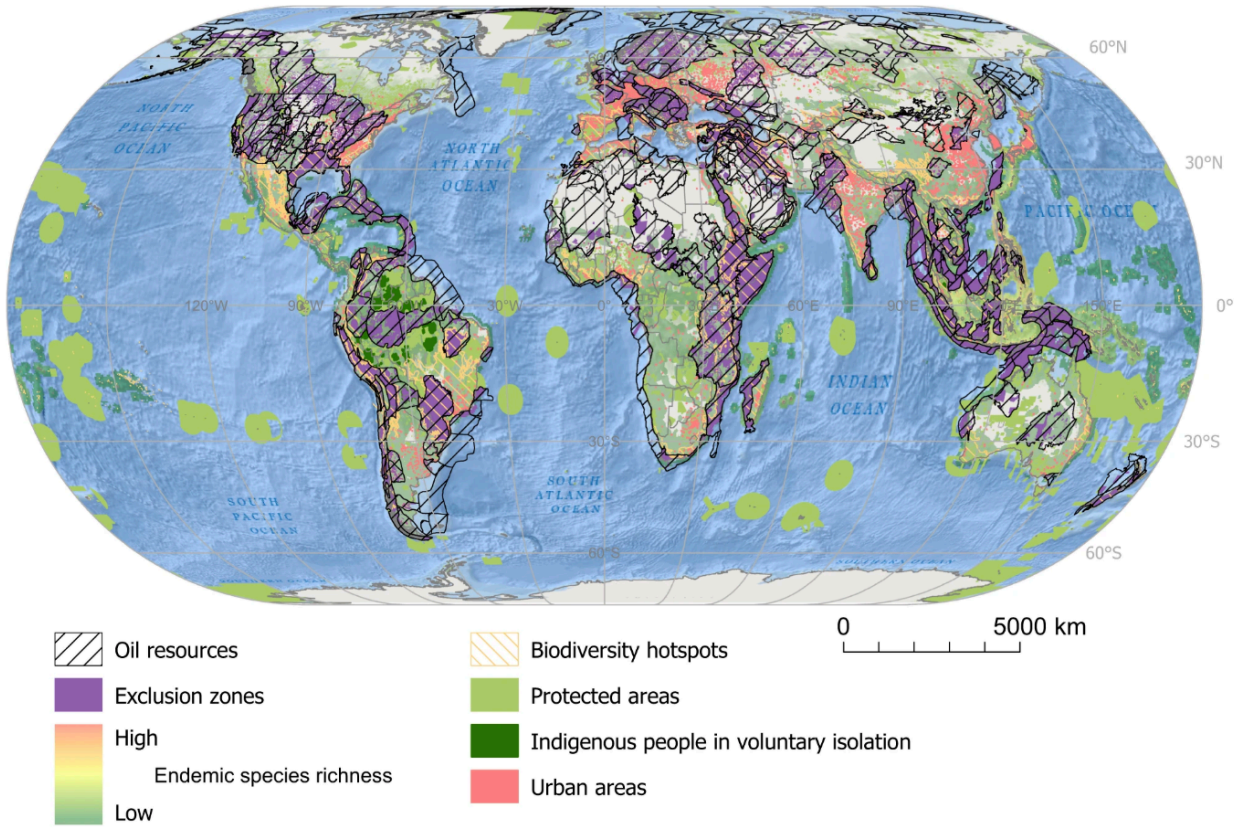
Fossil-free Zones are a concrete strategic tool for advancing the transition away from fossil fuels, particularly in areas threatened by their expansion and critical to climate security, social well-being, and global biodiversity. They are intentionally designated areas where the exploration, development, and extraction of fossil fuels are permanently prohibited.<sup>1</sup>

### What is at stake?

Research shows that **oil and gas blocks already overlap with** approximately [179 million hectares of tropical moist forests](#) – roughly 21% of the Amazon, Congo Basin, and Southeast Asian forest cover. As of 2024, there were [918 protected areas globally](#) hosting **ongoing or planned fossil fuel extraction** projects and [518 Key Biodiversity Areas](#) (or 18% of KBAs by area) in tropical regions overlapped by active and potential oil and gas concessions. Globally, almost [27% of global conventional oil resources](#) overlap with top-priority socio-environmental areas. In 2024 alone, [85% of new oil discoveries were made offshore](#), frequently [overlapping with marine biodiversity hotspots](#) like coral reefs, mangrove forests and seagrass meadows.

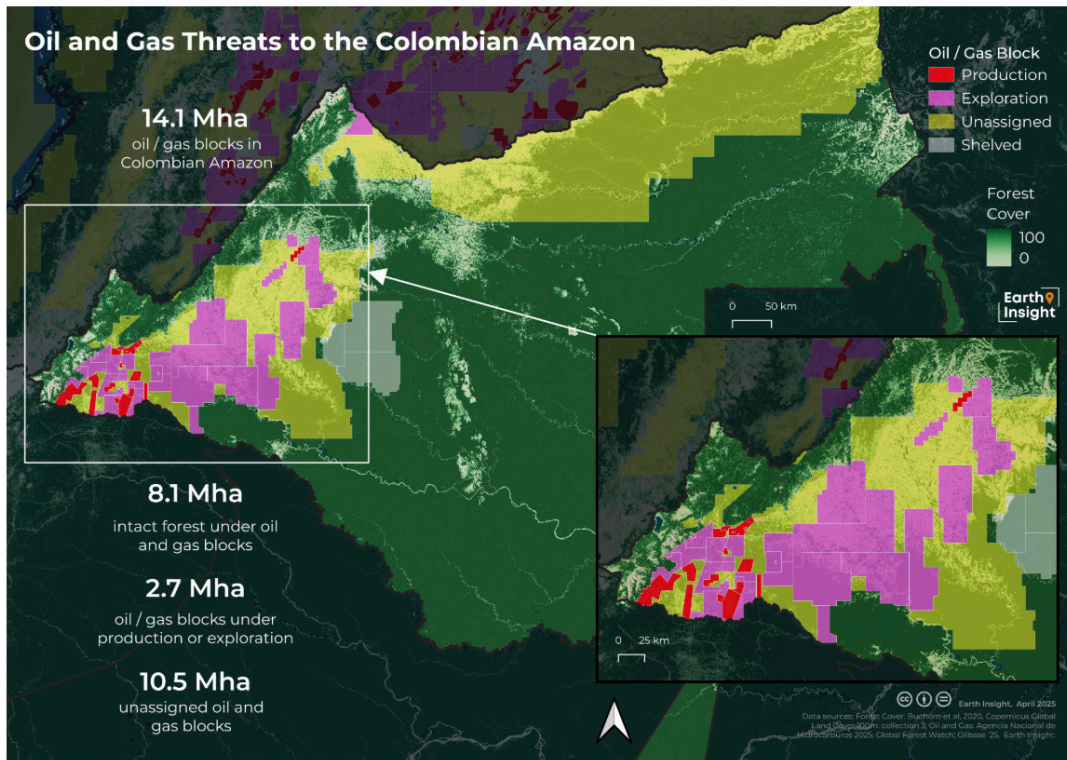
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<sup>1</sup> The definition of FFZs in this briefing builds on the term introduced in academic literature by Dr. Fergus Green in 2022, where he proposed Fossil Free Zones as a framework “to facilitate grassroots, goal-driven climate action, and government policy...” and defined it as “a geographic area characterised by the complete absence of fossil fuel exploration, production, transportation, intermediate treatment, and consumption activities.”



## COUNTRIES ARE LEADING THE WAY

A recent and illustrative example of a Fossil Free Zone is the Colombian Amazon. Last September, the government of Colombia [announced a landmark ban](#) on fossil fuel and large-scale mining extraction across its entire Amazon region. Colombia’s decision followed demands from [Indigenous Peoples, civil society organisations](#) and [members of parliament](#) to end fossil fuel extraction in the Amazon. The decision was taken in the wake of research that found that developing untapped reserves beneath the country’s tropical forests would [generate billions of dollars in stranded assets while doing almost nothing for national energy security](#). It would, however, threaten **20% of the intact Amazon forest** and the territories of **nearly 70% of the Indigenous and local communities** whose lands are overlapped by fossil fuel blocks. In most of the Colombian Amazon, the cost of extraction is higher than the cost of conservation. Recently, Colombia reaffirmed its commitment to Indigenous Peoples’ rights and critical ecosystems by reintroducing a [similar prohibition in Sierra Nevada](#), the site of the upcoming Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels.



A notable effort to expand Fossil Free Zones is being led by [parliamentarians across the Amazon basin](#) who introduced legislation to extend the fossil ban region-wide.

Other countries are also taking steps in this direction. Mexico has [100 million hectares of similar Safeguard Zones](#), [Guatemala ended oil extraction in the Mayan Biosphere Reserve](#), Belize banned offshore oil and gas, Costa Rica established a moratorium on oil through to 2050, Canada banned future Arctic offshore exploration and the Philippines restricted the exploitation of energy resources in protected areas.

## SUBNATIONALS AND BANKS SUPPORT FFZS

The financial sector is recognizing the downsides of fossil fuel expansion in critical biocultural areas. [Eleven banks have applied various levels of financial restrictions to the oil and gas sector in the Amazon](#). There are also over [500 examples of sub-national and local initiatives](#) that have declared themselves as fossil-free zones. However, despite these efforts, the strength and implementation of the policies and commitments remain uneven.

Industries leading the energy transition, such as renewable energy developers, sustainable finance institutions, and technology companies with net-zero supply chain commitments, also have a direct stake in the fossil-free zone agenda. The reputational and legal risks of engaging with supply chains in fossil fuel frontiers are growing.

## FFZS IN VOLATILE ENERGY MARKETS

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The world is entering the fossil fuel endgame – a period of declining global demand as renewable energy and energy efficiency scales up. In 2025, wind and solar growth [outpaced all new electricity demand](#), and [more than a quarter of all vehicles sold were electric](#), a trend that is expected to continue. However, in the short run, many vulnerable producing countries remain **fiscally and politically dependent on fossil revenues**, even if they are marginal global producers. These countries may be **pressured to front-load oil and gas development before demand shrinks** because their credit ratings, currency stability, social services, and energy security are tied to an ever-growing fossil frontier, especially in the midst of volatile energy markets. The ongoing conflict involving Iran has amplified that volatility, further pressuring fossil fuel producers to expand domestic extraction.

In this context of a disorderly transition, there is a growing risk that countries may develop unconventional and frontier reserves even if they are economically uncompetitive in the long-term. **A disorderly fossil fuel transition may thus cause significant avoidable harm to ecosystems and frontline communities**, while exposing vulnerable producers to severe financial and physical risks from stranded assets. Developing these untapped reserves requires massive public investment in infrastructure with long lead times, including roads that themselves become vectors for illegal logging, small-scale mining, and agricultural encroachment, further undermining critical ecosystem services that underpin social wellbeing and growing bioeconomy sectors.

Instead, there is an **emerging economic logic for protecting ecosystems against fossil fuel extraction**. Intact tropical forests and mangroves underpin water security for agriculture and energy generation, and together with peatlands and seagrass meadows act as critical carbon sinks. Creating fossil free zones in areas critical for climate safety, biodiversity and of high cultural significance like Indigenous Peoples territories could generate jobs and revenue from protected area management, sustain watershed services, and promote sustainable tourism, while supporting the local agriculture that most rural communities depend on. [Over 33 million people are employed directly in the forest sector](#), and there are more than 1.6 billion small forest farm producers.

Implementing internationally-backed fossil-free zones, paired with real financial support, is more urgent than ever.



## A CONCRETE OPPORTUNITY IN SANTA MARTA

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At COP30 in Belém, after several days of discussion amongst countries on how best to fulfil the First Global Stocktake commitment for transitioning away from fossil fuels in a just and orderly manner (TAFF), the Brazilian Presidency decided to take charge of this discussion and launch a collective process to develop a TAFF roadmap.

In this process, Fossil Free Zones offer a concrete, proven response for countries to contribute to the roadmap. They translate the global commitment to “transition away” into a specific, place-based decision that governments can adopt at the national or subnational level. The policy and administrative costs associated with FFZs can be relatively modest, while the potential reputational, social and environmental benefits are significant. Governments can leverage and strengthen existing legislation to implement FFZs, building on the experience of establishing protected areas or in recognising Indigenous Peoples and local communities’ land tenure. These policy tools are well understood at regional, national, and sub-national levels, and international guidance already exists on restricting harmful activities within these areas. In many cases, preventing new concessions (i.e., not licenced) in sensitive areas or removing concessions (i.e., not licenced concessions in national inventories) can serve as a first step towards the establishment of full FFZs without any policy developments.

The [First Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels](#), co-hosted by Colombia and The Netherlands in Santa Marta on April 28-29, 2026, is a concrete opportunity to uplift FFZs as part of the international TAFF toolbox. Delegations gathered at Santa Marta can demonstrate to the world that establishing FFZs is not only possible, but is an effective step to advance a just and orderly TAFF.

In Santa Marta, Governments should integrate FFZs into the Conference outcomes as an enabling pathway for a just and orderly TAFF by:.

- **Recognising FFZs as a concrete strategy to advance the fossil transition in the Co-Hosts’ final report, signaling it as a key tool to stop fossil fuel expansion also in the COP30 Presidency roadmap process.**
- **Launching an international process to develop shared guidance to identify FFZs of global and national relevance and their effective implementation pathways, including existing policies and national energy transition plans.**
- **Declaring at the High-Level Segment their intention to protect key ecosystems during the fossil transition and ensure they are off limits to fossil fuel extraction.**

**Considering FFZs as a standing discussion item in any future Conferences on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels**



## A RARE MOMENT OF POLITICAL ALIGNMENT

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Fossil Free Zones are important beyond Santa Marta and the COP 30 Presidency TAFF roadmap. They also **converge with the COP 30 Presidency Roadmap for Halting and Reversing Deforestation and Forest Degradation by 2030 and the upcoming Global Biodiversity Framework review at UN CBD COP17**, where efforts to effectively conserve at least [30% of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas](#) by 2030 (30x30) will be assessed. This makes 2026 a unique moment of political alignment. FFZs sit at the intersection of all three processes: they are a tangible contribution to a just and orderly fossil fuel transition, a direct mechanism to halt deforestation and protect biodiversity, and a path towards meeting 30x30.

FFZ are a practical on-ramp for countries that want to align with the global energy transition but need a concrete, geographically-defined starting point – and are also a direct delivery mechanism for the deforestation roadmap, translating a global pledge to halt forest loss into specific action to thwart a real driver of deforestation.

The Santa Marta Conference, bringing together at least forty governments committed to action, is exactly the kind of space where **FFZs can move from a promising innovation with a positive track-record to a shared international strategy** that supports the achievement of all these international commitments.

The question is no longer whether fossil fuel extraction will end, but whether that end will be proactively managed or chaotic. The latter will put some of the planet's most critical ecosystems in danger. Fossil Free Zones offer hope of preventing avoidable irreversible harm to the forests, marine ecosystems, and Indigenous Peoples, which represent humanity's best remaining insurance against climate collapse – one territory at a time.





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