

Tree Loss Increases in Crucial Tropical Forests

Deforestation rates appear “headed in the wrong direction” despite international pledges to halt destruction, according to an annual assessment.



By Manuela Andreoni

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More than a year after countries pledged to end deforestation by 2030, the world is continuing to lose its tropical forests at a fast pace, according to a report issued on Tuesday.

The annual survey by the World Resources Institute, a research organization, found that the world lost 10.2 million acres of primary rainforest in 2022, a 10 percent increase from the year before. It is the first assessment to cover a full year since November 2021, when 145 countries pledged at a global climate summit in Glasgow to halt forest loss by the end of this decade.

“We had hoped by now to see a signal in the data that we were turning the corner on forest loss,” Frances Seymour, a senior fellow at the institute’s forest program, said. “We don’t see that signal yet, and in fact we’re headed in the wrong direction.”

The report, done in collaboration with the University of Maryland, documented tree loss in the tropics from deforestation, fires and other causes. Last year’s destruction resulted in 2.7 gigatons of carbon dioxide emissions, a significant amount that is roughly equivalent to the annual fossil fuel emissions of India, a country of 1.4 billion.

Tropical deforestation also degrades some of the planet’s richest ecosystems, the habitats for plants and animals and the regulators of rain patterns for several countries.

The Amazon rainforest, the largest in the world, hasn’t faced such enormous destruction in almost two decades, according to an analysis of the World Resources Institute data by Amazon Conservation, a research organization.

Brazil, the country with the largest portion of tropical rainforest, had the highest rates of deforestation globally. It accounted for more than 40 percent of tree loss globally, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo and Bolivia.

Bolivia delivered some of the report’s most striking numbers. Forest loss there went up 32 percent last year, the highest rate on record for that country. It was one of the few tropical forest countries that did not sign the Glasgow commitment on deforestation.

Marlene Quintanilla, a research director at the Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza, a nonprofit group in Bolivia, said a powerful driver of destruction in that country has been a government policy that encourages farmers to clear vast tracts to secure land titles.

“The standing forest isn’t seen as fulfilling any social or economic function,” she said.

The expansion of agriculture appeared to be hurting forests in Africa. In Ghana, the country that lost the biggest proportion of its primary forest last year, small-scale clearing for cocoa production was a major source of deforestation.

Forest clearing is strongly linked to a lack of economic opportunities and basic infrastructure in the Congo River Basin region. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, most people don’t have access to electricity, so the forest is an important source of firewood and charcoal for cooking.





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ss deforestation,” he said.

One of the few bright spots in the report came from Southeast Asia, where efforts to curb deforestation in Malaysia and Indonesia continued to yield results. A logging moratorium, efforts to restore peatlands, and corporate commitments to exclude palm oil suppliers linked to deforestation appear to be effective.

And there are signs the trajectory of global deforestation may change for the better in the near future.

The European Union this year delivered a push in that direction, adopting a law that bans the import of a series of products that contribute to deforestation in tropical countries. China, the world’s largest importer of many agricultural commodities, has recently committed to cracking down on illegal deforestation linked to its trade with Brazil.

Brazil also seems to be changing course. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took office in January vowing to protect the Amazon rainforest, and preliminary numbers for the first five months of the year suggest deforestation rates there have declined by 31 percent since January. Deforestation and environmental crime had increased sharply under his predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro.

The report’s analysis focuses on the tropics because forest loss there is usually more permanent and tends to be caused by human activity. Tropical forests also have a greater role in storing carbon and supporting biodiversity. But global tree cover loss beyond the tropics was down 10 percent last year.

According to the report, the decline was a direct result of fewer wildfires in the boreal forests of Russia. But this could change. Canada is on track to have its worst fire season on record.

El Niño, a climate pattern that is usually associated with more wildfires in the tropics, has also just arrived. There is concern that, even if countries are able to curb deforestation during this period, wildfires could erase some of their efforts.

“An El Niño year will be a test,” Rod Taylor, the global director for forests at the World Resources Institute, said, adding that he hoped fires would not wreak havoc. “But we’ll have to see.”

A correction was made on June 27, 2023: An earlier version of this article misspelled the given name of a senior fellow at the World Resources Institute’s forest program. She is Frances Seymour, not Francis.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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