

### **The Threat of Deforestation**

The Earth's forests are disappearing at an alarming rate, and in no other place is this demonstrated better, or worse, than in the world's rainforests. According to the Tropical Rainforest Coalition, 500,000 trees are cut down every hour in the tropical rainforests, with an area of a football field being destroyed every second.

With these staggering statistics comes the surprising realities of loss of biodiversity, increase in climate temperatures and loss of water for the indigenous peoples of the rainforests. As these people's resources shrink, ours too, become jeopardized.

The causes of rainforest degradation are numerous. Perhaps the biggest contributing factor is the need for financial stability on the part of the inhabitants of the rainforests. Since the rainforests are located in underdeveloped countries, these people are continuously vying for resources to simply survive.

Many turn to slash and burn agriculture in order to eek out a meager existence. They will cut down a small area of forest, and then burn the trees to clear it for farming or cattle grazing. However, these people do not understand the soils in these forests are unable to support the intensive use of the land needed for agriculture. In many cases, the soils are depleted of all nutrients and are worthless after a few short years. It is estimated that the forests would need at least 50 years to become close to what they once were after being abandoned by the farmers.

The need to timber also contributes to the loss of the rainforests. Logging companies, both legal and illegal, make trips deep into the rainforests, not only cutting down the timber for

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wood products used throughout the world, but also bulldozing trees and vegetation to make roads into the forests.

The largest amount of deforestation is not in the Amazon, as many might think. Increasingly, Indonesia is losing more forests each year, now at 3.8 million hectares. The threat is not only due to illegal logging practices, but also to a new policy to allow open-pit mining in the forests. Activists fear more widespread flooding, pollution, landslides and droughts, not to mention the threat to the plant and animal species that call the rainforest home.

“The world will be a poorer place, more genetically impoverished, with greater soil erosion, more flooding and it will have suffered a major climatic change from the release of carbon-related gases from the burning and decay of forest vegetation,” said John Roper, author of *Deforestation: Tropical Rainforests in Decline* and forest conservation consultant.

The loss of species is perhaps the saddest and most disturbing of the effects of deforestation. Tropical rainforests are home to over half of all plants and animals on Earth. And with the destruction of these habitats also comes the extinction of many species we have not even catalogued yet. It is estimated that 137 species disappear every day. The impact of the loss of these species is devastating on the future of the Earth.

Global warming is another of the impacts of deforestation that the world will be paying for in years to come. When trees are cut down in the forest, large amounts of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere. The amount of oxygen is reduced, thereby increasing the accumulation of heat-trapping gasses. Because the surface of the land is also changed, the climate is affected by the altering of the amounts of the sun’s energy that are absorbed and reflected. The released carbon dioxide contributes to the greenhouse effect, almost one-third as

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much as the burning of fossil fuels, the leading cause of global warming. The increased temperatures can only have a detrimental effect on the world’s biodiversity and its human inhabitants.

Many international groups are becoming advocates of the rainforests and their inhabitants. From Greenpeace to Environmental Defense to Rainforest Alliance, groups all over the world are trying to increase the public’s awareness of how devastating the loss of the

rainforests will be. And while the governments in some of the countries in which the rainforests are located are trying to get a grasp on the amount of forests felled in the name of progress, many are falling short of making significant strides. The hopes of pulling their countries out of debt and making a better life for their citizens prevents them from seeing past the immediate rewards.

The solutions are, therefore, more complex and more difficult than simply asking them to stop deforestation.

The answers, according to Roper are to “educate the people about the social, economic and environmental consequences of the mismanagement of the tropical rainforests, give greater support to making agriculture in the periphery of the forests more productive and more sustainable, and obtain international support to the creation of forest reserves to protect representative stands of tropical forests.”

Ned Leonard of the Greening Earth Society has worked to help in the creation of forest reserves here in North America. His organization has helped to make the forests more productive.

“This translates to more forest being brought back due to forestation,” Leonard said. “Unless we think globally, act locally and take a long-term view, our children’s lives and Earth’s future are in jeopardy.”