

The Disappearing Forest



Ten thousand years ago, about half of the surface of the earth was covered in trees. Now, that proportion is down to about one-third, or four billion hectares. What's worse, the rate of cutting has increased exponentially in recent years. Globally, we are now cutting down forests at the rate of 400 000 hectares a week. At this rate, there will be no forests left by the year 2030.

But a forest is more than just the trees. A single forest is a complete, functioning ecosystem that supports innumerable plant and animal species as well as earth, water, and air subsystems. The subsystems provide the essence of life of the forest and are in themselves a byproduct of forest systems, all of which are reciprocal and interdependent. The further bad news is that 50 000 animal species disappear every year, many of them without ever having been classified or recorded. One of the main causes of this mass extinction is deforestation. Deforestation is also a major cause of soil erosion and water pollution, and the rampant destruction of the tropical rain forests in the southern hemisphere, according to some scientists, is contributing to the greenhouse effect, which in turn is leading to global warming.

So why do we keep cutting, and what must we do to solve the problems created by deforestation? On the one hand, the answer is simple; reduce the number of trees being cut down on this planet. On the other hand, the answers are complex and involve the global, economic, and political issues of wealth redistribution, poverty, land reform, overconsumption, and overpopulation. Each of these is a complex political issue and each has a direct link to deforestation. None is easy to solve in the short term. Most environmentalists agree we must solve them, and efforts are being made at both grassroots and international levels to do so.

At the Rio Conference on the Environment in 1992, protection of forests was identified as a prime area of concern for the world's nations. Leaders from around the world signed Agenda 21, part of which entailed a commitment to work toward sustainable management of forests. But at the Rio + 5 Conference held in 1997 to review progress on Agenda 21 goals, it became apparent that little had changed in the world's forests. In fact, rates of deforestation in places like the Amazonian rain forest have actually increased since 1992.

Solving the problem requires a concerted international effort and coming to grips with the fact that old ways of approaching issues are no longer going to work. Saving forests from massive deforestation requires us to find ways to break down the barriers that exist between rich nations and poor nations because the issue of disappearing forests is also a global economic issue. Forests are disappearing in poorer nations in part because cutting down trees provides much-needed agricultural land and export products. For wealthier nations less dependent on such natural resources to simply urge poorer nations to reduce the pace of deforestation overlooks an important part of the equation. And we must not forget that the forestry industry in wealthier nations—like Canada, for example—is also a significant part of the economy. Creating real dialogue between industry representatives and environmentalists that will lead to workable plans to reduce the rate of deforestation is an enormous challenge in itself. And we must factor in the involvement and interaction of governments and individual citizens. Sustainability is the goal, interdependence the theme. Integrating human needs and planetary resources is the task at hand.

Clayoquot Sound

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