



story

Forests: Protecting Our Protectors

Much more than just trees, forests comprise entire ecosystems of animal and plant species, herbs, fungi, microorganisms, and soils. In fact, they are home to about 80% of the world's land-based animals and plants. Forests provide people with wood, medicine, food, fresh water, and clean air, and millions of the world's poor rely on forests for their livelihood.

So, to say that forests help to nurture all life on the planet is no exaggeration.

Forests also influence nature's capacity to cope with natural hazards. Their destruction could cause altered rainfall patterns, soil erosion, flooding of rivers, and the potential extinction of millions of species of plants, animals, and insects. In addition, widespread deforestation means losing an important source of carbon storage, which exacerbates global warming.

In spite of their crucial role in our well being, forests are threatened by our actions on a scale that far exceeds nature's capacity to adapt. Protecting our forests and using them in a sustainable and responsible way is one of the greatest challenges the world faces today.

Causes of Deforestation

Although trees are a renewable resource (they can replace themselves when harvested in a sustainable manner), they are being cut down faster than they can grow back. Factors that are causing this include illegal logging, agricultural expansion, mining, settlement, plantation establishment, infrastructural development, and invasive pests and diseases.

Addressing forest loss is not easy, as many of the issues involved are complicated. For many poor people, it is a catch-22 situation. They harvest trees and deplete the forests to meet their daily needs. But in the long run, they are losing their access to forests, and therefore their livelihoods, as a result of deforestation.

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Causes of Deforestation (continued)

But it is not only poor people who are causing deforestation. Often, forest owners often will sell the land when faced with economic incentives. Cutting down forests to grow export items such as coffee and soybeans, or to make furniture from trees are two economic incentives that also contribute to forest depletion.

What to Do?

In many countries, poor forestry and lack of governance have contributed to the mismanagement of forests. So, an important task is to help governments improve their policy and management in the forest sector. Fortunately, several groups are now working to restore degraded areas through reforestation efforts, designating protected areas, and raising funds for conservation. For example, there has been some progress in restoring Brazil's Atlantic Forest.

As individuals, there is also a lot we can do. These are just a few ideas: Recycle paper products; buy recycled products; plant trees; write to government officials and the newspaper about forestry issues and the need to recycle. Spread the word as much as you can.

Ancient and majestic, forests are places of spiritual refuge, beauty and grandeur. It is our generation's responsibility to protect them and their multitudes of inhabitants.

LEARN MORE

Check out these sites to learn more about Forestry

Deforestation

Learn more about the causes of deforestation.

www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A3556848

Global Forest Watch

Use the interactive map feature to zero in on forests by region.

www.globalforestwatch.org/english/interactive.maps

National Geographic Magazine Greenhouse

See how environmentally friendly your house is.

www.nationalgeographic.com/everyday/greenhouse

Rainforest Action Network

Learn more about the issues and how you can help.

www.ran.org

Types of Forests

Learn about the different classifications of forests, and where they are located.

www.wwfbrasil.org.br/about_wwf/what_we_do/forests/about_forests/types

Virtual Forests

Learn about the different kinds of trees, and see which ones your furniture is made of.

archive.greenpeace.org/foresthous

WWF Virtual House

Play the games to see how our everyday lives can affect the planet's biodiversity.

www.virtualhouse.org