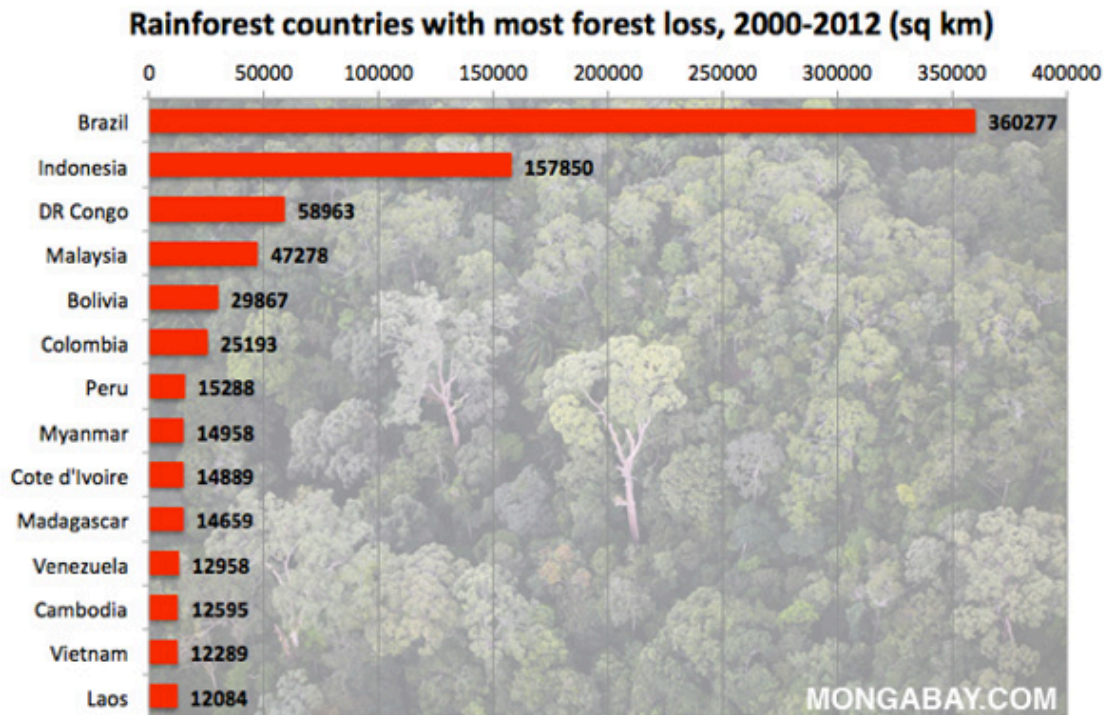


WHY ARE RAINFORESTS BEING DESTROYED?

Every year an area of rainforest the size of New Jersey is cut down and destroyed. The plants and animals that used to live in these forests either die or must find a new forest to call their home. Why are rainforests being destroyed?

Humans are the main cause of rainforest destruction. We are cutting down rainforests for many reasons, including:

- wood for both timber and making fires;
- agriculture for both small and large farms;
- land for poor farmers who don't have anywhere else to live;
- grazing land for cattle;
- pulp for making paper;
- road construction; and
- extraction of minerals and energy.



Rainforests are also threatened by climate change which is contributing to droughts in parts of the Amazon and Southeast Asia. Drought causes die-offs of trees and dries out leaf litter, increasing the risk of forest fires, which are often set by land developers, ranchers, plantation owners, and loggers.

In 2005 and 2010 the Amazon experienced the worst droughts ever recorded. Rivers dried up, isolating communities, and millions of acres burned. The smoke caused widespread health problems, interfered with transportation, and blocked the formation of rain clouds, while the burning contributed huge amounts of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, worsening the effects of

climate change. Meanwhile, Indonesia has experienced several severe droughts in recent decades. The worst occurred in 1982-1983 and 1997-1998 when millions of acres of forest burned.

One of the leading causes of rainforest destruction is logging. Many types of wood used for furniture, flooring, and construction are harvested from tropical forests in Africa, Asia, and South America. By buying certain wood products, people in places like the United States and Europe are directly contributing to the destruction of rainforests.

While logging can be carried out in a manner that reduces damage to the environment, most logging in the rainforest is very destructive. Large trees are cut down and dragged through the forest, while access roads open up remote forest areas to agriculture by poor farmers. In Africa logging workers often rely on "bushmeat" for protein. They hunt wildlife like gorillas, deer, and chimpanzees for food.

Research has found that the number of species found in logged rainforest is much lower than the number found in untouched or "primary" rainforest. Many rainforest animals cannot survive in the changed environment.

Local people often rely on harvesting wood from rainforests for firewood and building materials. In the past such practices were not particularly damaging to the ecosystem because there were relatively few people. Today, however, in areas with large human populations the sheer number of people collecting wood from a rainforest can be extremely damaging. In the 1990s, for example, the forests around the refugee camps in Central Africa (Rwanda and Congo) were virtually stripped of all trees in some areas.



Illegal logging in Madagascar.



Deforestation in Borneo.

Every year thousands of miles of rainforest are destroyed for agricultural use. The two groups chiefly responsible for converting rainforest into farmland are poor farmers and corporations.

Poor farmers in many parts of the world rely on clearing rainforest to feed their families. Without access to better agricultural lands, these people use slash-and-burn to clear patches of forest for short-term use. Typically, they farm the cleared land for a couple of years before the soil is exhausted of nutrients, and they must move on to clear a new patch of forest.

Agricultural companies are clearing more rainforest than ever before, especially in the Amazon where large tracts of rainforest are being converted into soybean farms. Some experts believe that South America will someday have an area of farmland that rivals that of the American Midwest. But much of this farmland will come at the expense of the Amazon rainforest.

In Asia, especially Malaysia and Indonesia, large areas of rainforest are being cleared for oil palm plantations to produce palm oil, which is used widely in processed food, cosmetics, and soap. Today palm oil is found in some 50 percent of packaged snack foods, a proportion that is growing because palm oil is the cheapest type of vegetable oil. Unfortunately, the forests that are being destroyed for palm oil production are home to many endangered species, including orangutans, pygmy elephants, Sumatran tigers, and Javan and Sumatran rhinos.

Clearing for cattle pasture is the leading cause of deforestation in the Amazon, with Brazil now producing more beef than ever before. Besides raising cattle for food, many landowners use cattle to expand their land holdings. By simply placing cattle on an area of forest land, landowners can gain ownership rights to that land.

Most of the beef produced by Brazil is consumed by Brazilians, but cattle products like leather is primarily exported to overseas markets.

Road and highway construction in the rainforest opens up large areas to deforestation. In Brazil, the Trans-Amazonian highway resulted in the destruction of huge areas of forest by colonists, loggers, and land speculators. In Africa, logging roads give access to poachers who hunt endangered wildlife as “bushmeat” or meat sold to city dwellers. Some of the poached wildlife—especially rhinos, pangolin, and tigers—goes to Asia where it is used for traditional Chinese medicine.

Therefore it is very important that when new roads are built in rainforest areas, they are carefully planned to minimize the environmental impacts. One way to reduce deforestation from road construction is to create protected areas on either side of the road.

The production of pulp for the paper industry has been one of the biggest causes of deforestation in parts of Indonesia over the past 20 years. Vast areas of rainforest in Sumatra have been logged and converted into fast-growing plantations consisting of only a single species. These plantations are used to produce fiber for wood-pulp and paper, which is turned into cardboard packaging, fast-food wrappers, printer paper, and junk mail. Just think about how much paper we use on a daily basis: paper, in one form or another, comes with almost every product we buy. In some cases that paper is produced directly through the destruction of rainforests.

Consequently, pulp and paper production is now one of the biggest threats to the critically endangered Sumatran tiger.



Deforestation for a plantation in Laos.

Gold, copper, diamonds, and other precious metals and gemstones are important resources that are found in rainforests around the world. Extracting these natural resources is frequently a destructive activity that damages the rainforest ecosystem and causes problems for people living nearby and downstream from mining operations, especially from toxic runoff into river systems. There have been cases of mining companies--sometimes working with local police or authorities--forcibly displacing forest people from their lands in order to exploit mineral riches. Examples are gold mining in the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon, rare earth mining in the Congo, and gold and copper mining in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

Some of the world’s most promising oil and gas deposits lie deep in tropical rainforests. Unfortunately oil and gas development often takes a heavy toll on the environment and local people. Oil and gas development in rainforest areas causes displacement of local people, air and water pollution, deforestation, and construction of roads that open previously inaccessible areas to deforestation. High energy prices in recent years have spurred increased exploration of rainforests for oil and gas. The western Amazon--including Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil--has seen a lot of activity. More than 70 percent of the Peruvian Amazon--including indigenous territories and conservation areas--is now under concession for oil and gas.

Dams are also a big threat to rainforests, particularly in the Amazon, the Mekong (Laos and Burma or Myanmar), and Malaysia. Dams disrupt river systems, flood rainforest, displace forest people, and support activities that cause more deforestation. In Sarawak, which is part of Malaysian Borneo, more than a dozen dams are being planned. These will force thousands of forest-dependent people to move and will inundate important rainforest areas. The power generated by the dams will be used for large-scale mining activities, causing further destruction. Similarly, in Brazil, Belo Monte dam will block the Xingu river, a tributary of the Amazon, flooding more than 100,000 acres of rainforest and displacing more than 15,000 people. Electricity from the project will power mining activities and industrial agriculture that will destroy yet more rainforest. Indigenous people, scientists, and environmentalists strongly oppose the project.



Rainforest in Peru

Poverty plays a major role in deforestation. The world's rainforests are found in the poorest areas on the planet. The people who live in and around rainforests rely on these ecosystems for their survival. They collect fruit and wood, hunt wildlife to put meat on the table, and are paid by companies that extract resources from forest lands.

Most rural poor never have the options that we in Western countries take for granted. These people almost never have a choice to go to college or become a doctor, factory worker, or secretary. They must live off the land that surrounds them and make use of whatever resources they can find. Their poverty costs the entire world through the loss of tropical rainforests and wildlife. Without providing for these people, rainforests cannot be saved.

However, people in the wealthier world, such as the U.S. and Europe, also play a large role in the destruction of rainforests, even if the forests are very far away.