

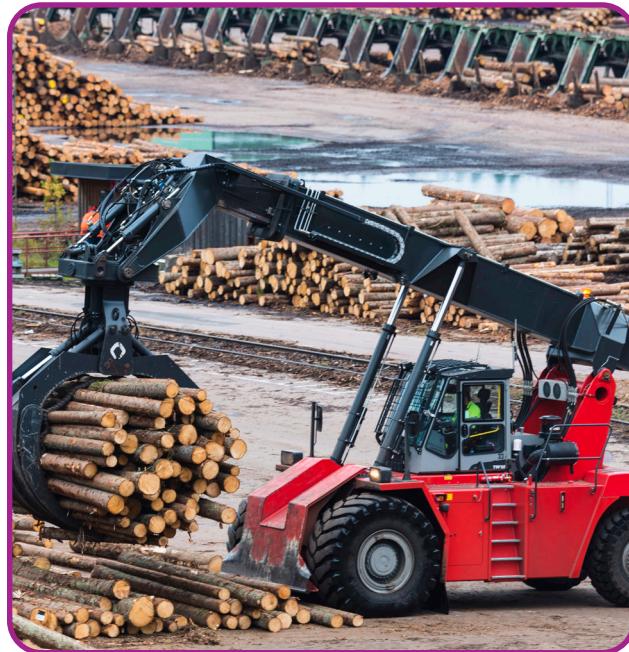
When Forests Are Given the Axe

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Over the past 40 years, an area of forest the size of Europe has gone. Disappeared! It's been estimated that if we don't change our rate of **deforestation**, in just 100 years there could be none left. Imagine that—a whole planet without a single forest. So, is there anything we can do?

Forests were once a lot bigger than they are today. In fact, until fairly recently, they covered about half of the Earth's land surface. Forests are now falling at such a rate that we lose enough trees every minute to fill 20 football fields. But what's the cause of all of this? And why is it all happening so quickly? That's right, you guessed it—it's because of us. All over the world, forests and the millions of animals living in them are in danger as we chop down or destroy trees at an alarming rate. But why are we doing it?



Well, There Are a Number of Reasons

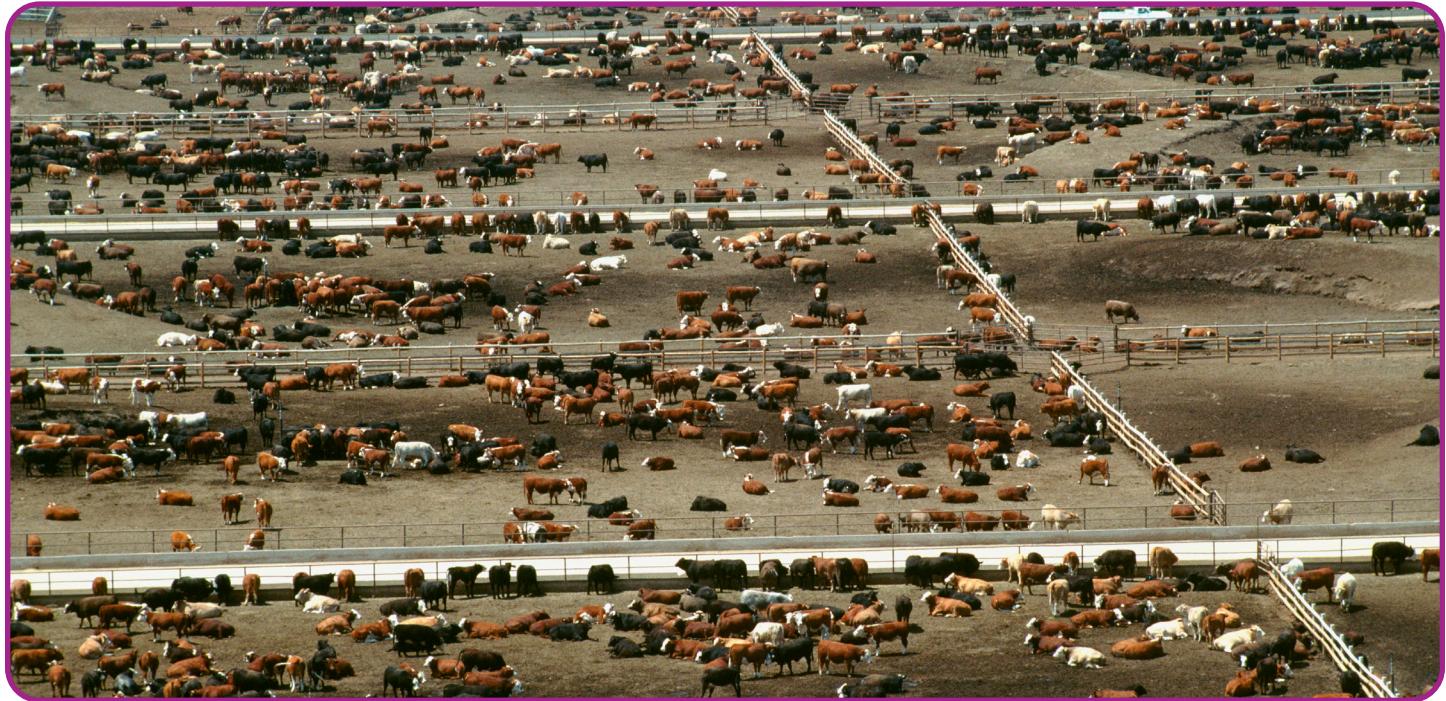
One reason is the **timber** trade. Every year, millions of trees are cut down, taken to factories, chopped up into smaller pieces, then made into all kinds of furniture and woodwork. You might be sitting at a wooden desk right now. Other wooden products include everything from doors to window frames to coffins to chopsticks. And paper? That's made from wood too. On its own, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. People have been chopping down trees and making all kinds of things from them for thousands of years, and it's never been a big problem before. But this was because it was done in moderation, with only a small number of trees chopped down at a time. This gave forests time to recover. There was a balance. But when big **logging** machines were invented, that all changed. Suddenly, people had the power to chop down whole forests in a matter of days, leaving nothing behind. And as demand for wood products increased, extensive logging became more and more widespread and unsustainable.

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Another reason for deforestation is **mining**. Some rain forests are rich in precious metals like gold, or gemstones like diamonds. Just like logging, gold and diamond mining is often done on an industrial scale, meaning whole forests are chopped down to get at the materials.

But perhaps the biggest reason for global deforestation is something you might not have expected: to make room for cows. Thousands of acres of forest are lost every year to create farmland, where cattle can eat, sleep, and moo. These animals are raised for their meat—so if we all ate a little less meat, the demand would go down, and we wouldn't need to cut down so many trees to make room for them.



But Does It Really Matter If We Lose All of Our Forests?

Yes. It really does.

First of all, if we lose all of the forests on the planet, we'll be losing millions of irreplaceable plants and animals. Some experts think we are already losing up to 100 different species of plants and animals every week—many of which haven't even been discovered yet. And once they're gone, they're gone forever.

One very famous type of animal that's at risk of **extinction** is the orangutan. This hairy ape is native to the islands of Borneo and Sumatra in Southeast Asia, and is one of the most intelligent animals on the planet. They're so smart that they can even learn **sign language**. Unfortunately, since 1950, the number of orangutans living in the wild has declined by 60%, and it's likely to continue to fall. The main cause of their decline is logging, with many forests on the islands cleared and replaced with oil palm plantations. Without trees to swing between and sleep in, orangutans just won't survive—and sadly, these wonderful animals aren't alone. The list of species that are **endangered** due to deforestation also includes jaguars, birdwing butterflies, and many more.

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Adorable apes and other animals aren't the only ones affected by deforestation either. There are things we all use every day that we get from forests—and some of them could even save your life. Some of the ingredients in medicines come from, or are based on, chemicals found in plants that grow in forests. For example, malaria can be treated using a chemical called quinine, found in the bark of the cinchona tree. Yams, which can be found growing in forests in Mexico, can be used to treat high blood pressure. And there are many other plants all over the world which contain natural medicines that can be used to treat a whole range of diseases and symptoms, from headaches to fevers. Just think of all the lifesaving plants that might be out there in the jungles, still waiting to be discovered! If we keep chopping down our forests, we might be losing potential cures and medicines for all kinds of diseases.



Another problem with deforestation is that a lot of trees that are chopped down are burned to produce energy. This releases loads of carbon dioxide into the **atmosphere**, which traps heat around the planet. As more and more carbon dioxide builds up in the atmosphere, the world gets slightly warmer. This warming can cause major changes to the weather and create big problems for every country in the world.

So, Can Anything Be Done?

Now, that all sounds like a lot of bad news, but there must be some hope, right? Well, the good news is that conservation groups, governments and organizations all over the world are working hard to stop deforestation, in a number of ways.

First, forests can be made into National Parks, which are protected patches of land where logging, mining, and farming are banned. Another approach is to simply plant more trees. Forests take thousands of years to regrow, which means this isn't a quick solution and won't replace the older established forests we've already lost. But it's a good start—especially if some of these newer trees are used for timber, protecting established forests from further logging. Finally, we can introduce laws that stop people from chopping down forests. In 2004, Paraguay in South America passed a law banning people from cutting down any of its forests. Since then, the deforestation rate in Paraguay has been reduced by 85%.

A Green Future?

Forests are some of the most important and incredible landscapes on Earth, and it would be a tragedy to everyone if we lost them. So, will any of these ideas work? We'll have to wait and see. One thing we do know, however, is that forests will only be saved if enough people care about them to do something. So, if you think they're worth saving, hold onto that enthusiasm and do what you can to help.

Glossary

atmosphere—the gases surrounding the Earth

deforestation—clearing away a wide area of trees

endangered—a species at risk of extinction

extinction—the process of a species being entirely wiped out, with no living members left

logging—cutting down trees, and preparing the wood to be sold and used in industries such as furniture making

mining—digging holes in the Earth, or drilling deep down into the Earth, to get to useful materials under the surface such as metals and minerals

sign language—a system of communication using visual gestures and signs, often used by people who are deaf

timber—wood prepared for use in building and carpentry