

What's Really Causing Deforestation?

The Facts

Deforestation is the permanent conversion of forest to other land uses such as agriculture, pasture, settlements, or infrastructure. While natural disturbances like storms and pests can temporarily reduce forest cover, deforestation specifically refers to long-term loss of forest functions and cover.

The True Global Engines Of Forest Loss

The primary cause of deforestation and habitat destruction is agriculture, development and extraction. Globally, around 80% of deforestation is due to agricultural production as forests are cleared to make room for cattle, palm oil, soy and other commodity crops.[1] Illegal logging, infrastructure development (building roads and houses) and mining have significant impacts in driving forest loss. Deforestation is most significant in the three major forest basins of the Amazon (South America), Congo (Central Africa) and Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia, drastically reduced primary forest loss after the mid-2010s, following moratoria and corporate "no-deforestation" pledges.

In South America, where natural forests occupy the most land area compared to other continents, rates of deforestation vary from one Amazon country to another, mostly because the factors that drive this process also vary across the region. In Brazil, for instance, most clearing is carried out by large and medium-scale ranches to create cattle pastures, whereas the role of small farmers clearing for agriculture is relatively more widespread in other countries.[2]

Primary causes of deforestation are:

1. *Agriculture – clearing for crops like cocoa, soy and palm oil*
2. *Cattle ranching*
3. *Logging for fuel, timber and furniture*
4. *Infrastructure development*
5. *Mining and extractive industries*
6. *Fire and climate driven reasons*

The problem is often more severe in areas close to cities, roads, and rivers, where access to forests is easier. Yet even remote regions, once thought to be untouched, are increasingly under pressure. The presence of valuable resources such as mahogany and gold attracts loggers and miners, leading to significant forest degradation.[2]

On top of human activity, climate change is compounding the damage. More frequent and intense wildfires, prolonged droughts and pest outbreaks are leaving forests weakened and more vulnerable. While windstorms, wildfires, and bark beetles have traditionally been among the main natural threats, recent heatwaves combined with drought have sharply increased tree mortality across many forested areas.[3]

However, contrary to common perception, paper is not at the heart of deforestation. Instead, paper typically comes from responsibly managed forests, plantations or recycled materials. The vast majority (over 90%) of the European paper industry's wood fibre originates from within Europe. To be assured wood is sustainably sourced, the paper industry strongly relies on forest certification, where 73% of wood and 90% of market pulp comes from forest management certified sources.[4]

Europe's Forests Are Growing, Not Shrinking

In Europe, the story is encouraging. Forests cover around 40% of the European territory and are growing in both area and volume. Currently, the total volume is approximately 28 billion m^3 and is growing by around 612 million m^3 every year. This is a net annual growth of more than 2% once the volume of harvested forests has been deducted.[5] Semi-natural forests account for over 90% of Europe's forest area, plantations another 3% and old growth forests for about 2%.[6]

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In Europe, where almost all primary forests are protected, paper comes from sustainably managed forests where the cycle of planting, growing and logging is carefully controlled.

A number of schemes exist to ensure forests are sustainably managed. The two most recognised are the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). Both schemes have similar objectives: the certification of forests to credible, independently verified standards of responsible forest management, conserving the natural habitats of plants and animals, and respecting the rights of forestry workers and local communities. Both operate a robust chain of custody schemes that track wood and wood fibre through every step of the supply chain, from the forest to the end-user.

Final Thoughts

Deforestation is undeniably a global problem where change in land use, particularly for agriculture and farming, timber, mining and urban development, needs to be controlled by legislation.

In Europe, the new European Union Deforestation-free Regulation (EUDR), effective from January 2026, will help limit deforestation all over the world. The EUDR will ensure that commodities purchased in the EU - including soy, beef, palm oil, wood, rubber, cocoa, and coffee - must come from legitimate, legal sources that doesn't contribute to deforestation and forest degradation.[7]

In Europe, North and South America alike, paper is part of a sustainable cycle that is sourced responsibly, recycled and managed within a circular economy. In Europe, paper fibres were reused an average of 4 times in 2024[8] with 51% of the fibrous raw material used in Europe's paper industry coming from paper for recycling.[9] In 2024, a total of 53.4 million tonnes of paper was collected and recycled in Europe, resulting in a recycling rate of 75%. In 2021, the signatories of the European Declaration on Paper Recycling declared their commitment to reach a 76% paper recycling rate by 2030.[8]

Paper is one of the most recycled products in the world and epitomises the circular economy model of make, use, recycle and reuse.

For more information on paper production and sustainable forests, visit www.twosides.info/fact-sheets

Sources

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