

Our Vanishing World: Rainforests

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Theme: [Environment](#)

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Rainforests are a crucial feature of Earth's biosphere. Apart from being critical to Earth's climate and vital carbon sinks, the major player in Earth's hydrological (water) cycle, a massive producer of oxygen and home to most of the world's species, rainforests are the home of a large indigenous human population. They are also the source of many vital resources, including medicines, used by humans around the world.

However, the vast range of ecological services that rainforests have provided ongoingly for the 400 million years of their existence, and which have been critical to the survival of homo sapiens since we first walked the Earth 200,000 years ago, are not measured and valued by accountants and economists: Have you ever seen a balance sheet or set of national accounts that includes an entry for 'Value of ecological services taken from nature and on which life and our entire production of goods and services depend'?

Because these services have been available without the need for human management or intervention, and given the primitive conception of accounting and economics that humans use, the ecological services of rainforests are given no monetary value. Hence, essential ecological services are treated as worthless by virtually everyone in the industrialized world. As a result, modern industrialized humans have decided to systematically destroy the rainforests in order to extract a vast amount of short-term profit for the benefit of a few and the temporary satisfaction of many. So if we do not value ecological services such as oxygen and water generation as well as climate and weather-moderating capacities, what is it that we do value by destroying rainforests?

A small proportion of rainforest is logged to provide attractive rainforest timbers – such as teak, mahogany, ebony and rosewood – for a variety of decorative purposes, including making furniture, which can last hundreds of years.

However, a much wider range and vastly greater quantity of rainforest trees are cut or burnt down for purposes such as the following: acquiring timbers used in construction, clearing land to establish cattle farms so that many people can eat cheap hamburgers, clearing land to establish palm oil plantations so that many people can eat processed (including junk) foods based on this oil, clearing land to establish palm oil and soy bean plantations so that some people can delude themselves that they are using a 'green biofuel' in their car (when, in fact, these fuels generate a far greater carbon footprint than fossil fuels), mining (much of it illegal) for a variety of minerals (such as gold, silver, copper, coltan, cassiterite and diamonds), and logging to produce woodchips so that some people can buy cheap paper, including cheap toilet paper.

In essence then: We trade the essential life-giving and sustainably-available ecological services of Earth's rainforests, also home to indigenous peoples and countless wildlife, for hamburgers and other processed junk foods, carbon-intensive 'biofuels', paper and some

building and furniture materials, as well as some minerals. Obviously, some humans are far from clever at 'making deals'.

But if you think that is bad, consider this: 'by one estimate, a hectare of livestock or soy is worth between \$25 and \$250, while the same hectare of sustainably managed forest can yield as much as \$850' harvesting, depending on the location, such products as medicinal plants, rubber, nuts and fruits while benefitting from a range of ecotourism services and research opportunities. See ['Rainforest on Fire: On the Front Lines of Bolsonaro's War on the Amazon, Brazil's Forest Communities Fight Against Climate Catastrophe'](#). Of course, you have to know how to manage the forest sustainably to yield this much income but that sort of intelligence is rare and invariably escapes those focused on destruction for short-term profit.

So how bad is this rainforest destruction? Well, worldwide we are currently destroying rainforests for these unsustainable and mainly short-term products at the rate of 80,000 acres each day. See ['Measuring the Daily Destruction of the World's Rainforests'](#).

Moreover, beyond the devastating impact this has on indigenous peoples, forcing increasing numbers of them to leave their destroyed homes in the rainforest to try to survive elsewhere, this rainforest destruction is also the key driver of species extinctions globally **with one million species of life on Earth threatened with extinction**. As reported in the recent [Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) researched and published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) - the scientific body which assesses the state of biodiversity and the ecosystem services this provides to society - 'Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history. The IPBES *Global Assessment* ranks, for the first time at this scale, the 5 direct drivers of change in nature with the largest global impact. So what are the culprits behind nature's destruction?' Number 1. on the IPBES list is 'Changes in land and sea use, like turning intact tropical forests into agricultural land'.

Let me briefly illustrate the nature and extent of this destruction by discussing rainforests in just three locations (the Brazilian Amazon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Indonesia/West Papua) where the destruction of rainforest was greatest in 2018 - see ['The World Lost a Belgium-sized Area of Primary Rainforests Last Year'](#)- and which are representative of elsewhere around the planet where even World Heritage listed areas are ongoingly under threat.

The Brazilian Amazon



IBAMA operation against illegal loggers in the Brazilian Amazon, courtesy of IBAMA.

While the Amazon in South America occurs in several countries, two-thirds of it lie within the borders of Brazil. Unfortunately, since his fraudulent election in 2018, the neofascist, corrupt and insane president Jair Bolsonaro – see the definition of sanity, which Bolsonaro does not come close to meeting, in [‘The Global Elite is Insane Revisited’](#)– has promptly eliminated years of painstaking effort by committed indigenous and environmental activists to convince previous governments to protect the Brazilian Amazon from the worst corporate and other depredations.

For just a taste of the documentation on Bolsonaro’s actions in accord with elite interests and to the detriment of indigenous and environmental well-being, see [‘Bolsonaro Caps Natives’ Lands, Pleasing Farmers in One of First Acts’](#), [‘Rainforest on Fire: On the Front Lines of Bolsonaro’s War on the Amazon, Brazil’s Forest Communities Fight Against Climate Catastrophe’](#), [‘Bolsonaro’s Clearcut Populism. “The Barbarism has Begun”](#)’, this report from Amazon Watch: [‘Complicity in Destruction II: How northern consumers and financiers enable Bolsonaro’s assault on the Brazilian Amazon’](#) and [‘Amazon Deforestation Accelerating Towards Unrecoverable “Tipping Point”](#)’.

The key drivers of rainforest destruction in the Amazon are soy production and cattle ranching. Brazilian soy accounted for 14.3% of the country’s total exports, generating \$31.0 billion in 2017, while cattle exports accounted for about \$5.4 billion. Because Brazil leads the world in exports of both of these commodities, it is the world market for these products that is driving these industries to aggressively expand activities to the detriment of the rainforest and indigenous peoples.

But the Amazon is huge, you might say: Does it matter if we destroy some of it for soy and cattle farming? **Well, one recent study suggested that deforestation of 20-25% of the Amazon would be the tipping point beyond which it would cease to be a functioning rainforest ecosystem and this, as you might expect, would be catastrophic. Moreover, recent severe droughts appear to be ‘the first flickers of this ecological tipping point’ suggesting that it is already imminent.** See [‘Amazon Tipping Point’](#).

So, to reiterate, the key driver of rainforest destruction in the Brazilian Amazon is consumer-generated demand for certain products in other parts of the world. And while the US and European countries play critical roles in destruction of the Amazon, China is the largest importer of agricultural products from Brazil so its government and consumers are complicit too. For example, as China's demand for Brazilian soy surges due to the trade war between the United States and China, 'it could drive further ecological catastrophe: 13 million hectares (50,000 square miles) in the Amazon and Cerrado could ultimately be cleared to meet this additional demand.' See ['Complicity in Destruction II: How northern consumers and financiers enable Bolsonaro's assault on the Brazilian Amazon'](#).

The point then, is this: governments and ordinary people (in their role as consumers) in other parts of the world can play a vital role in defending the Amazon and its indigenous peoples – see, for example, [Brazil's Indigenous People Articulation](#)– by choosing what they buy from Brazil. Boycotting rainforest timber, beef and soy bean products are powerful options to consider. But don't forget, there is no point simply identifying and boycotting *Brazilian* timbers, beef and soy beans. If you want impact on the total market (to prevent one country's timber, beef and soy beans being substituted for another's), then you must boycott them all (unless you can clearly identify the source of the product as local and sustainable). Obviously, this takes commitment. The future of the Amazon depends largely on enough of us making that commitment.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo in Central Africa

The rainforests of the Congo Basin in central Africa are the second largest on Earth. Much of this rainforest lies within the borders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, crippled by corrupt government for decades and a new president elected earlier this year who has inherited a corrupt and inefficient state apparatus. See ['Democratic Republic of the Congo: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption'](#).

Unfortunately, therefore, rainforests in the Congo have long been under siege on several fronts. With rebel soldiers (such as the Rwanda-backed M23), miners and poachers endlessly plundering inadequately protected national parks and other wild places for their resources, illegal mining is rampant, over-fishing a chronic problem, illegal logging (and other destruction such as charcoal burning for cooking) of rainforests is completely out of control in some places, poaching of hippopotami, elephants, chimpanzees and okapi for ivory and bushmeat is unrelenting (often despite laws against hunting with guns), and wildlife trafficking of iconic species (including the increasingly rare mountain gorilla) simply beyond the concern of most people.

The Congolese natural environment – including the UNESCO World Heritage sites at Virunga National Park and the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, together with their park rangers – and the indigenous peoples such as the Mbuti ('pygmies') who live in them, are under siege. In addition to the ongoing mining, smaller corporations that can't compete with the majors, such as Soco, want to explore and drill for oil. For a taste of the reading on all this, see ['Virunga National Park Ranger Killed in DRC Ambush'](#), ['The struggle to save the "Congolese unicorn"'](#), ['Meet the First Female Rangers to Guard One of World's Deadliest Parks'](#) and ['The Battle for Africa's Oldest National Park'](#).

Unfortunately too, as with rainforests elsewhere, 'What Happens in the Congo Basin Doesn't Stay in the Congo Basin': it impacts on regions across Africa playing a part, for example, in

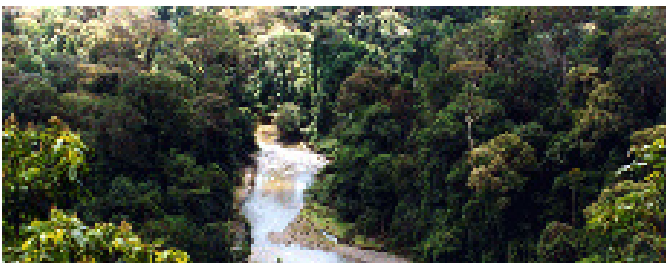
recent droughts in Ethiopia and Somalia causing millions of people to depend on emergency food and water rations. See [‘Congo Basin Deforestation Threatens Food and Water Supplies Throughout Africa’](#).

As with the Amazon, you have some powerful options to consider if you want to save the Congolese rainforests and their indigenous peoples. Again, refusing to buy rainforest timbers, conflict minerals and wildlife products is a good start but remember that key minerals in your computer and mobile phone are illegally sourced from the Congo so your thoughtful consideration of minimizing how many of these devices you own can play a part too. For a fuller account of this exploitation and its destructive impact on the rainforests and its indigenous peoples, with references to many other sources, see [‘500 years is long enough! Human Depravity in the Congo’](#).

Indonesia and West Papua

Indonesia has the most extensive rainforest cover in Asia – and is home to hundreds of distinct indigenous languages and over 3,000 animal species including Sumatran tigers, pygmy elephants, rhinoceros and orangutans – but the forests are being systematically degraded and destroyed. Rainforest cover has steadily declined since the 1960s when 82 percent of the country was covered with forest; it is less than 50 percent today. The rainforest is being destroyed by logging, mining, large-scale agricultural plantations (especially for palm oil), colonization, and subsistence activities like shifting agriculture and cutting for fuelwood. Much of the remaining cover consists of logged-over and degraded forest although large areas, including of the island of Kalimantan/Borneo (shared with Malaysia and Brunei), have been stripped bare.

Logging for tropical timbers and pulpwood (to make paper) is the biggest cause of rainforest destruction in the country where as much as 75 percent of the logging is illegal. Indonesia is the world’s largest exporter of tropical timber, which generates more than \$US5 billion annually. And more than 48 million hectares (55 percent of the country’s remaining rainforests) are concessioned for logging. Destruction of the rainforest in Indonesia has opened up some of the most remote places on Earth to development: as rainforests in less remote locations have been decimated, timber corporations have stepped up practices on the island of Kalimantan/Borneo and the occupied West Papua, where great swaths of forests have been cleared in recent years. In fact, 20 percent of Indonesia’s logging concessions are in West Papua, despite ongoing resistance by West Papuans.



Unfortunately, the fastest and cheapest way to clear rainforests for plantations is by burning. Hence, every year ‘hundreds of thousands of hectares go up in smoke as developers and agriculturalists feverishly light fires before monsoon rains begin to fall. In dry years – especially during strong el Niño years – these fires can burn out of control for months on end, creating deadly pollution that affects neighboring countries and causes political tempers to flare’. See [‘Indonesian Rainforests’](#).

Mining operations, including for coal, also have a devastating impact on the rainforests and their peoples. See [‘New report exposes World Bank links to destructive coal mining in Indonesia’](#). By far the worst of these projects, however, is the gigantic gold, silver, and copper mine in occupied West Papua, run by Freeport-McMoRan. As widely documented, the mining company has dumped appalling amounts of waste into local streams, rendering downstream waterways and wetlands ‘unsuitable for aquatic life’. Relying on large payments to Indonesian police and military officers, the mining operation is ‘protected’; this has resulted in many West Papuans being killed.

The waste from the mine, estimated by Freeport at 700,000 tons each day, covers several square miles and Government surveys have found that tailings from the mines have produced levels of copper and sediment so high that almost all fish have disappeared from vast areas of wetlands downstream from the mine.

Like other powerful corporations in Indonesia (and elsewhere), Freeport-McMoRan is well aware that there is little official interest in its abuses of local people and the environment as long as corrupt officials are given sufficient incentive to ignore them. As elsewhere in many parts of the world, therefore, corporate access to resources includes serious human rights abuses and persistent conflicts between companies and local communities which is ignored by corrupt politicians. See [‘Indonesian Rainforests’](#).

Apart from the rainforest itself and the millions of people who live in them, destruction of the rainforest threatens the habitat of iconic species like Sumatran tigers and orangutans, as well as many others, and plays a part in destroying the climate too.

But the damage does not stop with the issues noted above. Forests across the world are being destroyed to make fabrics for clothing we wear every day. Fabrics like rayon, viscose and modal are all made from trees and, every year, more than 120 million trees are cut down to make clothing. This is done by companies such as Forever 21, Under Armour, Foot Locker, Prada Group and Michael Kors. You can join the Rainforest Action Network in campaigning to get these laggard companies to adopt responsible sourcing policies for their forest-based fabrics. See [‘Does your clothing contain rainforest destruction?’](#)

Bizarrely, while its incredible rainforests, along with its coral reefs and beaches, play a part in attracting tourists from across the world to see Indonesia’s charismatic native species – such as orangutans, Sumatran tigers, Komodo dragons, whale sharks, sea turtles and manta rays – and to experience its adventure and dive destinations, this tourism also contributes significantly to the destruction as rainforests make way for tourist facilities.

So, as with Brazil and the Congo, you can boycott rainforest products from Indonesia and other countries where rainforests are being destroyed. Along with suggestions made earlier, responsible choices about the clothing you wear and the tourist destinations you choose (or boycott) will all make a difference.

The ‘Big Picture’ Fight for the Rainforests: What can we do?

A great deal. Halting rainforest destruction might be a complex undertaking but it is imperative if we are to have any prospect of preserving life on Earth. So I hope that you will consider the many options I have offered above and those I mention now and do as many as you can, even if you are already working on other critical issues such as the climate and the struggle to end war and the threat of nuclear war.

If you want easy options, you can support the campaign efforts of organizations that defend rainforests, indigenous peoples and wildlife such as the [Rainforest Action Network](#), the [Rainforest Information Centre](#), the [Rainforest 4 Foundation](#) and [Rainforest Rescue](#) which work closely with indigenous and local communities while campaigning against the governments and corporations destroying rainforests, as well as the banks and insurance companies that support this destruction.

If you recognize the pervasiveness of the fear-driven violence in our world, which also drives the massive over-consumption of resources by people in industrialized countries – see [‘Love Denied: The Psychology of Materialism, Violence and War’](#) – then consider addressing this directly starting with yourself – see [‘Putting Feelings First’](#) – and by reviewing your relationship with children. See [‘My Promise to Children’](#) and [‘Nisteling: The Art of Deep Listening’](#).

If you want to understand and address the fundamental cause of violence in our world, see [‘Why Violence?’](#) and [‘Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice’](#).

If you wish to campaign strategically in support of indigenous peoples and local communities in their struggles to halt the destruction of Earth’s rainforests. See [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#).

The governments and corporations that profit from the destruction of the rainforests are deeply entrenched and not about to give way without strategically focused campaigns to make it untenable and unprofitable for them to do so. This will include convincing key personnel, whether company directors of corporations involved in rainforest destruction, cargo ship owners, trade unionists (in many industries) and the many other agents involved in the rainforest destruction-to-customer supply chain, as well as ordinary consumers of rainforest products, to make conscious choices about the products they supply, use and/or buy. So strategy is imperative if we are to get corrupt and/or conscienceless governments and corporations, as well as people further removed from the source of the destruction, to end their role in rainforest destruction before it is too late.

The big deforestation drivers are timber, palm oil, cattle and soy while mining, oil drilling, clothing and dam construction all play significant roles too, depending on the country. And, as reported by the CDP (formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project): ‘The ABCD (The Archer Daniels Midland Company [ADM], Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus Company) trader companies have a large impact on countless commodity supply chains. For example, they represent up to 90% of the global grain trade. With a wide array of clients that go from Nestlé to McDonald’s, their role in managing deforestation risk is crucial’ and, so far, grossly inadequate. See [‘Revenue at risk: Why addressing deforestation is critical to business success’](#) which contains a long list of hundreds of companies (on pages 39-46) which are making zero effective effort to end their rainforest-destroying business practices.

Given the strategic sophistication necessary to tackle this complex problem effectively, if you want to view a 15 minute video of (or read a couple of short articles about) the inspirational Melbourne Rainforest Action Group (MRAG) that successfully led a national campaign from 1988 to 1991 to halt imports of rainforest timber into Australia, you can view it here: [‘Time to Act’](#).

In those cases where corrupt elites control or occupy countries, such as those controlling Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and West Papua, it might be necessary to

remove these corrupt governments as part of the effort – see [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#) – thus helping to restore the political space for local populations to defend rainforests and their rights.

You might also consider joining the global network of people resisting violence in all contexts by signing the online pledge of [‘The People’s Charter to Create a Nonviolent World’](#).

But if you do nothing else while understanding the simple point that Earth’s biosphere, including its rainforests, cannot sustain a human population of this magnitude of whom more than half endlessly over-consume, then consider accelerated participation in the strategy outlined in [‘The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth’](#).

Or, if none of the above options appeal or they seem too complicated, consider committing to:

The Earth Pledge

Out of love for the Earth and all of its creatures, and my respect for their needs, from this day onwards I pledge that:

1. *I will listen deeply to children(see explanation above)*
2. *I will not travel by plane*
3. *I will not travel by car*
4. *I will not eat meat and fish*
5. *I will only eat organically/biodynamically grown food*
6. *I will minimize the amount of fresh water I use, including by minimizing my ownership and use of electronic devices*
7. *I will not buy rainforest timber*
8. *I will not buy or use single-use plastic, such as bags, bottles, containers, cups and straws*
9. *I will not use banks, superannuation (pension) funds or insurance companies that provide any service to corporations involved in fossil fuels, nuclear power and/or weapons*
10. *I will not accept employment from, or invest in, any organization that supports or participates in the exploitation of fellow human beings or profits from killing and/or destruction of the biosphere*
11. *I will not get news from the corporate media (mainstream newspapers, television, radio, Google, Facebook, Twitter...)*
12. *I will make the effort to learn a skill, such as food gardening or sewing, that makes me more self-reliant*
13. *I will gently encourage my family and friends to consider signing this pledge.*

Feeling overwhelmed? Still prefer something simpler?

I wish I could, in all sincerity, offer you that option. If it were still 1990, I would. But the time for simple actions to make a difference is long past and time is now incredibly short. See [‘Human Extinction by 2026? A Last Ditch Strategy to Fight for Human Survival’](#).

In essence, you have a choice: understand and act on the crucial importance of rainforests before we destroy their integrity and lose them completely. Or help to accelerate the human

rush to extinction as a consequence of failing to do so.

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