

(Earth Talk) 80,000 acres of tropical rainforest lost daily

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Dear EarthTalk: Do you have current facts and figures about how much rainforest is being destroyed each day around the world, and for what purpose(s)? -- Teri, via e-mail

Pinning down exact numbers is nearly impossible, but most experts agree that we are losing upwards of 80,000 acres of tropical rainforest daily, and significantly degrading another 80,000 acres every day on top of that. Along with this loss and degradation, we are losing some 135 plant, animal and insect species every day—or some 50,000 species a year—as the forests fall.

According to researcher and writer Rhett Butler, who runs the critically acclaimed website, Mongabay.com, tropical rainforests are incredibly rich ecosystems that play a key role in the basic functioning of the planet. They help maintain the climate by regulating atmospheric gases and stabilizing rainfall, and provide many other important ecological functions.

Rainforests are also home to some 50 percent of the world's species, Butler reports, "making them an extensive library of biological and genetic resources." Environmentalists also point out that a quarter of our modern pharmaceuticals are derived from rainforest ingredients, but less than one percent of the trees and plants in the tropics have been tested for curative properties. Sadly, then, we don't really know the true value of what we're losing as we slash, burn, and plant over what was once a treasure trove of biodiversity.

According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), overall tropical deforestation rates this decade are 8.5 percent higher than during the 1990s. While this figure pertains to all forests in the world's tropics, researchers believe the loss of primary tropical rainforest—the wildest and most diverse swaths—has increased by as much as 25 percent since the 1990s.

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Despite increased public awareness of the importance of tropical rainforests, deforestation rates are actually on the rise, mostly due to activities such as commercial logging, agriculture, cattle ranching, dam-building and mining, but also due to subsistence agriculture and collection of fuel wood. Indeed, as long as commercial interests are allowed access to these economically depressed areas of the world, and as long as populations of poor rural people continue to expand, tropical rainforests will continue to fall.

Some scientists see light at the end of the tunnel. Joseph Wright of the Panama-based Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute says the tropics now have more protected land than in recent history, and believes that large areas of tropical forest will remain intact through 2030 and beyond: "We believe that the area covered by tropical forest will never fall to the exceedingly low levels that are often predicted and that extinction will threaten a smaller proportion of tropical forest species than previously predicted."

Only time will tell whether Wright's optimistic predictions ring true, or whether a more doomsday scenario will play out. To stay informed and be part of the solution, stay tuned to the websites of Rainforest Action Network, Rainforest Alliance, the Rainforest Site and, of course, Mongabay.com.

CONTACTS: Mongabay, www.mongabay.com; Rainforest Alliance, www.rainforestalliance.org; Rainforest Action Network, www.ran.org; Rainforest Site, www.rainforestsites.com; FAO, www.fao.org.

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