



Forest Conversion

Position Paper

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One of a series explaining
WWF's position on key issues
impacting the world's forests

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Forests are amongst the most diverse and valuable ecosystems around the globe. They provide a wide range of products and benefits for humans and nature that can rarely be substituted through other means. An estimated 1.6 billion people worldwide rely on forests for their livelihoods, with 60 million indigenous people depending on forests for their subsistence. Another critically important function of forests is that they help protect the Earth from climate change. Every effort should therefore be made to prevent forests, especially those with high conservation values, from being converted.

Forest conversion involves the replacement of natural forests with other forms of land use. Often it is a process of gradual forest degradation, which may begin with removal of valuable timber and eventually lead to clearing of the land for plantations, crops, pasture, industry or urban settlement. During the last twenty years of the twentieth century, nearly one fifth, or 300 million hectares, of tropical forests were converted to non-forest land-uses worldwide. The conversion of forests can impose severe environmental and social costs, including loss of biodiversity due to destruction and fragmentation of natural habitats, water shortages, loss of natural vegetation where fires used to clear land burn uncontrollably into surrounding areas, and disregard for the rights and interests of local or indigenous communities.

Forest conversion also contributes to climate change, due to carbon emissions associated with soil disturbance (especially from carbon-rich peat soils) and the burning or decay of biomass from the converted land. Deforestation is the third largest source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, responsible for around one fifth of overall human induced global carbon emissions. Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change propose to include mechanisms for reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation in the next climate treaty.

The driving forces behind forest conversion vary and are often interrelated. These include non-existent or ineffective land-use planning procedures, poor governance, corruption and weak systems for asserting and defending traditional tenure rights. An underlying cause is increasing demand for agricultural commodities, which drives the expansion of the agricultural frontier into forests and other natural ecosystems. These same drivers often create incentives to log and sell the valuable timber out of natural forests and then convert the area to land uses that offer higher short term revenue streams than sustainable forest management.

Without significant changes in policy and practice, forest conversion is likely to continue to pose a major threat to forest and freshwater ecosystems with high conservation value (including the habitats of endangered species such as elephants, rhinos, tigers and great apes), the livelihoods of forest dependant peoples and global efforts at climate change mitigation.

WWF recognises that land-use planning decisions often involve tough trade-offs between social welfare considerations, economic development and conservation goals. WWF does not, therefore, advocate a wholesale global prohibition on conversion of natural areas to other land uses. In some circumstances, conversion of forests at one site may contribute to conservation and sustainable development in the wider landscape (e.g. reducing livestock grazing in a protected area may require conversion of forest areas in the buffer zone to provide farmland to local communities).

WWF is opposed to the indiscriminate conversion of natural ecosystems that have high conservation values and/or critical carbon storage functions to plantations, croplands, pastures, urban settlements and other land-uses. Examples of best practice to avoid such forest conversion include:

- Excluding from any conversion activity, all areas required to maintain high conservation values.
- Excluding from any conversion activity, all ecosystems that store large amounts of carbon, such as peat swamp forests, as a climate change mitigation measure.
- Clear designation, through a government-led multi-stakeholder process, of the areas in a given landscape that are to be excluded from conversion and maintained as part of the permanent forest estate.

- Respecting property and access rights of indigenous groups and local communities and the principle of free and prior informed consent for any conversion activity affecting those rights.
- Where forest conversion is proposed in circumstances that do not contravene the above safeguards, conducting independent prior environmental and social impact assessments and adopting measures to prevent, mitigate, monitor and report negative impacts of conversion.

WWF works together with governments, public and private institutions and other partners towards the elimination of unplanned and damaging forms of conversion to safeguard biodiversity and social values by:

- Calling for transparent land-use planning processes to achieve an optimal distribution of natural forests, plantations, agricultural areas, urban areas and other land-uses in a given landscape. This includes well-informed negotiations among a wide range of stakeholders to balance ecological, social and economic dimensions of natural resource use across the landscape.
- Calling for the elimination of policy incentives and perverse subsidies that contribute to forest conversion.
- Promoting mechanisms under the new climate change regime to reduce emissions from deforestation and increase the financial value of standing forests.
- Promoting responsible procurement policies and practices that favour commodities that are sustainably produced and avoid those associated with indiscriminate forest conversion.
- Promoting responsible finance and investment policies and practices that favour projects and companies that embrace the principles of sustainable development and screen out those associated with indiscriminate forest conversion.
- Inviting consumers in the developed world to adapt their lifestyles and purchasing decisions to reduce over-consumption and its related footprint on the world's forests.
- Calling for adequate and functioning governance structures in the forestry sector, that are able to enforce the legislation in forest management and forest conservation and deal successfully with cross-cutting issues such as land tenure, infrastructure building and economic development plans.

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