

We lose millions of square kilometres of forest each and every year due to deforestation. This is having a devastating impact on the world's wildlife populations and also creates a host of other problems across the planet. Is the issue really as serious as experts say it is, though? If so, can we do anything about it?

### **What is deforestation?**

Deforestation is the destruction of forests by people: it describes humans' actions of cutting down and clearing trees. Natural occurrences such as hurricanes, landslides and drought also affect forestry, of course, but the term refers specifically to the intentional removal of forest areas by humans.

Deforestation occurs for a number of reasons, including for timber and food production, and clearing ground for mining. The market for wood, as either fuel or a building material, is one of its most common motivations. The conditions in tropical rainforests, such as the Amazon in South America, are ideal for growing trees that produce strong timber. These are often felled (chopped down) for use in construction.

Another major reason for deforestation is the creation of farmland. As the population of the world continues to grow, more and more natural habitats for animals are destroyed to allow food to be produced for humans. Sometimes the land is used to grow and cultivate crops, but it can also be used to house livestock such as cows and sheep. Livestock farming takes up far more land than growing crops.

### **What problems does deforestation cause?**

The loss of beautiful natural features may be a sufficient reason to oppose deforestation – but there are other consequences, too.

The effects of deforestation have hit the populations of countless animal species. As areas of rainforest are destroyed, many lose their homes. Some may be able to survive by relocating, but they will then face competition for food from the creatures already living there. As creatures are forced closer together, they also invade each other's territories. Having developed fierce protective instincts, they often then attack one another. This combination of factors has resulted in mass extinctions: it has been estimated that deforestation causes the loss of up to 50,000 species of plants, animals and insects every year.

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Deforestation's effects also affect humans. Trees absorb the carbon dioxide, which humans breathe out, and they produce oxygen. The increase of carbon dioxide results in Earth's air becoming less suited to human survival. Carbon dioxide is also linked to global warming – the rising of temperatures on Earth – which affects other aspects of the natural world, including temperature and rainfall. Creating a cycle, this in turn affects the further growth of plants.

It can also affect soil levels in a rainforest, as tree roots help to prevent soil from being washed away by rainwater. Without the trees, soil is displaced and can block streams and rivers. This can not only cause flooding, but also pollute humans' drinking water.

### Why is the Amazon so often mentioned?

The Amazon is the world's largest rainforest and is therefore often at the forefront of discussion about deforestation. Its majority is in Brazil, but it spreads into other countries including Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia.

The World Wildlife Fund estimates that more than a quarter – 27 per cent – of the Amazon will be without trees by 2030, if deforestation continues at its current rate. This presents a significant issue: the Amazon region is believed to be home to around 10 per cent of all known species on Earth. The existence of many is at risk.

### What can we do about it?

If more is not done to combat deforestation, the areas of world's forests, including rainforests, will continue to be reduced – if unstoppable, this will of course mean that humans could be responsible for destroying all of Earth's forests. If no forests survive, neither will we.

Several major charities and organisations are working hard to fight deforestation and improve global awareness of the problem. Eating sustainable food, and less meat, will reduce the need for so much farmland to be created. Choosing recycled or sustainable wood products, like paper, reduces deforestation for wood supply.

There are also specific ingredients of food and cosmetic products that cause more harm than others. Crops grown for palm oil, for example, have been in particularly high demand over recent years. Palm oil is commonly used in the production of some foods, soaps, shampoos and fuel. In areas of Indonesia, deforestation for the growth of oil palms has led directly to a significant decline in the population of orangutans – so you can help by steering clear of products containing palm oil, too.