

FORESTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON NATIONAL SECURITY



Forests are critical ecological domains that maintain the conditions that support life on Earth. Forested areas cover almost a third of the planet's total land area, housing enormous biodiversity on Earth, helping with hydrologic and heat cycles, and acting as sinks that sequester carbon from the atmosphere.



The Threat

Destruction of forests poses risks to climate regulation, watershed stability, flood control, and soil stability. The benefits of forests—and the potential security risks inherent in their degradation, from economic to health to even armed conflict—have not been extensively assessed and are inadequately reflected in today's policies and decision-making practices.

- Deforestation has alarming implications for the biodiversity that is critical for the health, agriculture, and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. The last decade has seen a net loss of roughly 4.7 million hectares per year. Deforestation is a permanent conversion of forests to other land use, as we face an increased need for land use in the production of commodities, such as agriculture, mining, or energy. This alone contributes to over 70% of deforestation.
- There are ecological repercussions to deforestation. Forest degradation in the tropics is a primary driver of biodiversity loss, which has concomitant risks for humans and societies. Increasing global temperatures, shifting global water patterns, and decreasing water security are all direct impacts of deforestation.
- Forest loss and declines in forest integrity drive increases in some human infectious diseases. Disturbances and displacement of both wildlife and humans is causing migration and social disruption, and the encroachment of human populations and development into wilderness areas is increasing the likelihood of zoonotic disease spillover. Moreover, wildfires and deforestation have restricted indigenous peoples' ability to hunt and rural small-scale farmers are being pushed out by high land costs and soil exhaustion from high-intensity farming. Migration to other rural and pristine forest areas then creates more deforestation in a feedback loop.
- Illegal logging causes enormous economic damage. It's been estimated that the market losses from illicit timber were \$30 to \$157 billion dollars annually and lost tax revenues from \$6 to \$9 billion dollars annually. Some studies indicate that illegal logging suppresses global timber prices by 7 to 16 percent, which would deprive legal timber companies of substantial revenues. In the United States, for example, this translates to an estimated \$460 million to \$1 billion lost per year. Illegal forest activities influence regional unrest and conflict, create havens for illicit drug activities, and cripple a region's economy.

The Solution

International conservation is essential to the security and survival of the human population as it can, among other threats, assure food security and stability.

- **Strengthen partnerships:** Expanding and better managing protected areas while also countering harmful actions toward critical resources can help offset ecological degradation.

The United States should use its instruments of national power to counter foreign states that, in the pursuit of critical resources such as timber, engage in violations of sovereignty, precipitate conflict, fail to comply with international laws and norms, and exploit weaknesses in governance. In doing so, the U.S. should strengthen partnerships with like-minded countries, leverage law enforcement and anti-corruption tools, and build allies within the private sector, academia, non-governmental organizations, and other sectors.

- **Strengthen crime penalties:** It's time we treat environmental crimes as serious crimes by prioritizing anti-corruption efforts, targeting transitional criminal markets, and promoting effective prosecutions and deterrent penalties. The United States government should consider building national and international capacity to track and respond to transnational crime markets.

