

# 2021 Must Be a Turning Point for Forests. 2020 Data Shows Us Why

March 31, 2021 By **Frances Seymour**

---

## Finding

*Topic* **Forests**

More than 12 million hectares of tree cover in the tropics was lost in 2020 alone, according to [analysis of University of Maryland data by WRI](#). Most alarmingly, that included 4.2 million hectares of previously undisturbed primary tropical forests.

This loss represents a crisis for climate stability and biodiversity conservation, as well as a humanitarian disaster and lost economic opportunity. This analysis now covering 20 years of data shows all that's been lost — as well as the interventions that work.

**In a year when everything else slowed down, forest loss sped up.**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives and livelihoods around the world, and the global economy contracted by [around 3.5%](#) in 2020. Yet despite the economic downturn, the loss of primary tropical forests ticked *up* by 12% compared to 2019,

continuing an upward trend. Pandemic-related lockdowns probably contributed to short-term increases in forest loss in some cases by limiting the mobility of law enforcement officials and forcing urban-rural migration, but the more significant impacts of the pandemic on forests are likely yet to come.

Unless they see alternatives, governments grappling with constrained fiscal resources and high levels of debt will be tempted to cut the budgets of environmental agencies and license new investment projects that could show up in forest loss data in future years. And yet new studies ([here](#) and [here](#)) are finding that investments in conserving and restoring nature actually provide [more effective stimulus](#) than traditional measures.

## **Forests are increasingly falling victim to climate change.**

The most ominous signal from [the 2020 data](#) is the number and variety of instances in which forests themselves suffered in extreme weather events. In the Amazon, burning now occurs *inside* the rainforest, rather than just along the recently felled edges. Even wetlands are burning! Global warming and forest loss conspire to create warmer, drier conditions, which in turn render forests more vulnerable to fire and pest infestation. Subsequent burning and decay release more carbon emissions, feeding [a vicious cycle](#).

Nature has been whispering to us about these risks for a long time, but now she is shouting. The longer we wait to both stop deforestation *and* shift to net-zero emissions trajectories in other sectors, the more likely it is that our [natural carbon sinks](#) will go up in smoke.

## **20 years of data demonstrate what works.**

Although the overall trends are distressing, what's happened in a few individual countries inspires confidence that the drivers of deforestation *can* be defeated.

Indonesia has now reduced deforestation for four years in a row. Favorable weather, low commodity prices and implementation of corporate commitments to get deforestation out of commodity supply chains have undoubtedly contributed to that trend. But the Indonesian government's effort also deserves credit. In the aftermath

of [devastating fires in 2015](#), the government beefed up fire prevention and monitoring, and expanded moratoria on conversion of primary forests and peatlands.

What's significant about the Indonesia story is that it's been driven by a combination of domestic self-interest — avoiding the severe public health and other costs of fires — and international market and financial incentives. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that one of the provinces that experienced a steep drop in tree cover loss in 2020 was East Kalimantan, which just concluded an [agreement](#) with the World Bank for up to \$110 million in REDD+ finance if the province is successful in bringing down forest-based emissions. The province is also host to one of most mature [multisector, multistakeholder initiatives](#) in the country seeking to transition to more sustainable land use. Under a [Green Growth Compact](#) launched in 2016, government agencies, NGOs and the private sector have been coordinating efforts ranging from [securing village rights to forests](#) to protecting high-value forests within oil palm plantations.

## **What should be done to save forests now?**

These are fragile gains. We've seen this movie before. Brazil achieved a huge reduction in deforestation in the Amazon by deploying a suite of proven policy and market interventions, but now we're witnessing a heartbreaking unraveling of that success: The Brazilian Amazon experienced a [15% increase](#) in primary forest loss in 2020 compared to 2019. The policies and rhetoric of the Bolsonaro administration have [crippled environmental agencies and law enforcement](#), [encouraged land-grabbing](#), and [put indigenous territories at risk](#).

In the coming months, Indonesia will face rising palm oil prices and pressure to approve forest-risk investments under a recent [job creation law](#), even as a [three-year moratorium](#) on licensing of new oil palm plantations is set to expire this year. For Indonesia to maintain its success and other countries to follow its lead, the voices of domestic constituencies for forest protection need to be amplified. Space must be maintained for independent monitoring and advocacy by civil society.

The international community needs to ramp up incentives for those governments undertaking serious efforts to address deforestation to create a value proposition for

staying the course. Such incentives should include preferential market access for forest-risk commodities that are produced legally and sustainably. Governments should be able to count on financial reward and diplomatic recognition for success in bringing down forest-based emissions. They should also have access to the investment funds, debt relief, and technical support they need to embark on genuinely [green post-pandemic recovery](#) efforts.

## Forest Guardians Matter

It's also important to remember that the forest loss that is visible from satellites has profound impacts on the people and communities on the ground who depend on forests for their health, safety and livelihoods. Their lives matter. What we can see from satellites is that when [indigenous peoples](#) are present in forests and their rights are strengthened, forest cover is maintained.

Yet the number of [forest defenders being murdered](#) is rising along with the rate of forest loss.

With global climate summits on [climate change](#) and [biodiversity](#) on the calendar, 2021 is a year for solidarity among governments committed to averting the worst impacts of forest loss. It's also time for solidarity with the communities risking their lives to save the world's remaining forests.

Let's make 2021 the year that we finally muster the political will and financial resources to ensure that their efforts are successful.

---

## Relevant Work

---

### FORESTS

We Lost a Football Pitch of Primary Rainforest Every 6 Seconds in 2019

---

## FORESTS

### Indonesia Reduces Deforestation, Norway to Pay Up

Insights FEBRUARY 21, 2019

---

## AFRICA

### Places to Watch: 5 Forests at Risk This Month

Insights DECEMBER 13, 2017

---

## FORESTS

### The World Lost a Belgium-sized Area of Primary Rainforests Last Year

Insights APRIL 25, 2019