

News

Argentina's forests dwindle

Biodiversity at risk as forests give way to desert.

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Argentina, often perceived as a vast fertile territory, is losing its native forests. Nearly 40% of animal and plant species in the country's arid and semi-arid ecosystems are in danger from habitat loss, a new study suggests.



Desertification in Argentina's Mendoza

province. Silvia Urbina/IADIZA

"If deforestation continues at this rate, by 2036 we will only have small patches of native forests" left in the country, says Elena María Abraham, director of the Argentinean Institute of Arid Lands Research in Mendoza.

Abraham announced the new numbers on biodiversity threats — compiled over 20 years of laboratory and field studies — last month, at a meeting in Buenos Aires of the parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

In 1914, Argentina was estimated to have more than 106 million hectares of native forests; by 1996, when a national action programme against desertification began, only 36 million hectares remained. Today, the country's forests are vanishing at a rate of more than 829,000 hectares a year, mainly where agriculture is pushing into native forests.

Scientists are not just concerned about losing particular species. "By losing ecosystems, we lose what cannot be seen — diversity within, which allows one species to endure climatic changes or severe impacts on their environments," says Daniel Tomasini, the environment coordinator for the United Nations Development Program in Argentina, based in Buenos Aires.

Life without trees

Abraham and others are also calling attention to the interplay between climate change, environmental modification and deforestation. The northern part of the country has seen longer and heavier summer rains, which allow crops to be planted where they could not be sustained previously. More trees are then cleared for agriculture, meaning fewer trees can absorb the water from the rains. Massive floods have hit the provinces of Chaco and Salta — regions that have seen particularly high rates of deforestation.

Historically, native forests haven't been regulated properly, says Octavio Pérez Pardo, director of the national government department in charge of soil conservation and fighting desertification. The first federal law to regulate logging came into effect in 2007.

As a result, national and local governments are now working with universities and research institutions, along with social organizations, to classify forests from most to least threatened. Different programmes are being implemented in regions that have already been deforested, ranging from soil practices such as tillage to sustainable livestock programmes to regulate the amount of cattle in a region. "With adequate knowledge and funds, we can revert this process in almost all the affected areas," says Abraham.

Local residents have an economic stake in whether the forests are cut down or not. In 2008, products directly or indirectly derived from agricultural and livestock activities constituted more than half of the country's exports, for a total of US\$39 billion.

To keep intact forests economically viable, Tomasini says that one alternative would be to identify the services provided by forests, such as carbon sequestration, that could be wrapped into the global climate agreement due to be hammered out at the United Nations climate-change conference in Copenhagen in December.