

# Africa cocoa industry failing on deforestation pledge – campaigners

Tens of thousands of hectares cleared in Ghana and Ivory Coast since vow to end practice

**Ruth Maclean** *West Africa correspondent*

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A park ranger stands near an illegal cocoa crop in a forest in Ivory Coast, where 13,748 hectares of forest have been lost in the south-west region alone in 2018. Photograph: Mightyearth.org  
The cocoa industry is failing to meet a highly publicised pledge to stop deforestation in west Africa and eliminate tainted beans from supply chains, environmental campaigners say.

Big chocolate companies and the governments of Ghana and the Ivory Coast continue to be responsible for the deforestation of tens of thousands of hectares of land over the past year in former rainforest-covered nations, despite their solemn promises to end the practice last November, the campaigning organisation **Mighty Earth** said.

Last year the Guardian investigated how **the chocolate industry was driving deforestation** on a devastating scale in Ivory Coast and Ghana, the world's two biggest cocoa producers, including in supposedly protected "classified" forests and national parks.

Cocoa is mostly grown on small plots of land by individual farmers. Photograph: Mightyearth.org

Cocoa is a mainstay of the Ivorian and Ghanaian economies but their rainforests have been devastated by it. With **more chocolate being devoured** each year – the average Briton ate 8.4kg of it in 2017 – the few remaining forests **are being cut down** to meet demand.

Soon after the publication of the Guardian investigation and **a study** by Mighty Earth, the two west African governments made plans to stop all new deforestation and replant degraded forests.

Then, at the UN's conference on climate change in Bonn, the cocoa and chocolate companies responsible for the purchase of 80% of west Africa's cocoa **promised to end forest destruction**.

But more than 3,000 miles away from the executive photo ops, more trees were being cut down. Satellite mapping shows many new areas where there has been significant deforestation in the past year, particularly in **Ivory Coast**. In the south-west region alone, 13,748 hectares (34,000 acres) of forest have been lost in 2018 – equivalent to 15,000 football fields, more than the 13,000 lost there in 2016.



An area of newly cleared forest near Bloléquin in Ivory Coast, photographed in October. Photograph: Mightyearth.org

Governments have failed to stop it, and companies are still buying cocoa from "dirty producers" who continue to cut down the few remaining patches of rainforest, according to **Chocolate Greenwashing**, a Mighty Earth report released on Friday.

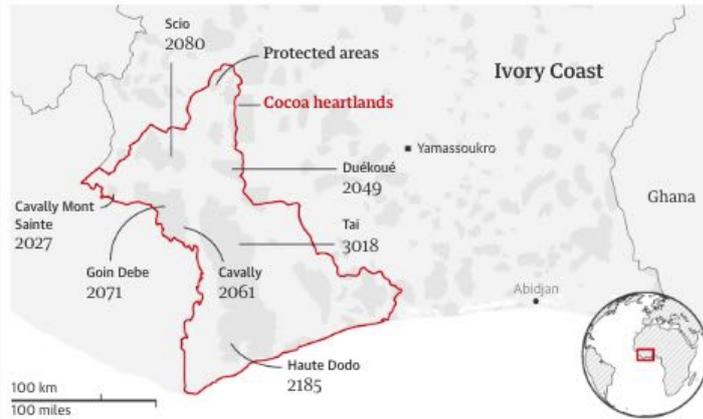
"Companies have talked the talk but not walked the walk," said Etelle Higonnet, the report's lead author. She warned that "peak deforestation danger season", the time of year when most trees are cut down, will begin within weeks. "The time for shilly-shallying is over," she said. "Government and industry need to commit manpower and resources to solve the problem right now."

At the moment, deforestation is worst in the far west of Ivory Coast, in areas such as Goin Debe and Cavally, the maps show. If nothing is done, Goin Debe's forests will disappear entirely by 2071 and Cavally's "protected" forest by 2061, Mighty Earth said. The country has lost

90% of its forest since independence in 1960.

### Some protected forests in south-west Ivory Coast will vanish this century at current rates of decline

Date when forests will vanish by, if deforestation continues at the same rate it has since November 2017



Farmers who continued to cut trees down said they could still sell their cocoa openly without any repercussions.

In Ghana deforestation continues inside Tonton, Tinte Bepo and Tano Ofin forest reserves, and unless the land is immediately restored, cocoa grown on it will probably find its way to the supply chains of big companies such as the Singapore-based agribusiness Olam, Mighty Earth said.

Cocoa is mostly grown on small plots of land by individual farmers, who sell it on to cooperatives and middlemen, who in turn sell it to big companies. This makes it more difficult to track cocoa beans down to the farm they were grown on and to monitor their practices.

Some farmers believe that recently deforested land produces the best cocoa plants with the largest beans and many do not realise that cutting down rainforests will ultimately result in less rainfall and therefore worse crops. More deforested land for cocoa plantations also means less for **critically endangered** western chimpanzees and the forest elephants from which the Ivory Coast got its name.

Higonnet said the clear progress seen in some areas proved deforestation for cocoa could be stopped. "Some bad actors are ruining it for the high-performers," she said.



A young family in their new, freshly deforested cocoa plantation near Bloléquin. The children work on the cocoa fields and have never been to school. Photograph: Mightyearth.org

Part of the Ivorian government plan has been to convert degraded “classified forests”, which should have been protected but were not, into agroforests managed by cocoa companies. Olam said it signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government for one of these forests in June.

Olam Cocoa’s CEO, Gerry Manley, said the objective was “to validate the development of sustainable agroforestry systems, ensure an improvement in cocoa farmer livelihoods and allow for the sustainable coexistence of protected forests, industrial plantations, subsistence crops, and perennial crops”.

Richard Scobey, the president of trade group the [World Cocoa Foundation](#), said a few companies had signed MOUs. “WCF has not seen any of them, but our understanding is that they are very general and high level,” he said.

Julia Christian, a forest campaigner at [Fern](#), an NGO that monitors deforestation, said the conversion plan was worrying. “It’s sending the message that if companies cause deforestation, at some point the government will just legalise the deforestation and allow it to continue,” she said.

Very little of the cocoa industry’s \$100bn (£80bn) profit makes it into the pockets of cocoa farmers even now. They receive **only 6%** of a chocolate bar’s sale price to the manufacturers’ and retailers’ 80%. But activists warn the new plans could further benefit corporations at the expense of farmers.

“The state has a duty to help small producers and agricultural cooperatives to become professional and competitive, instead of adopting a strategy that will ultimately eliminate them,” said Youssouf Doumbia, the president of OI-REN, an environmental civil society organisation. “The result of such a measure would ultimately be to concentrate almost all the revenues of the sector in the hands of a small group of managers of large companies and to impoverish the population.”

## Rare victory for rainforests as nations vow to stop 'death by chocolate'

**Plans by the governments of Ghana and Ivory Coast drawn up after Guardian investigation revealed links between the cocoa industry and rainforest loss**

**Ruth Maclean in Dakar**

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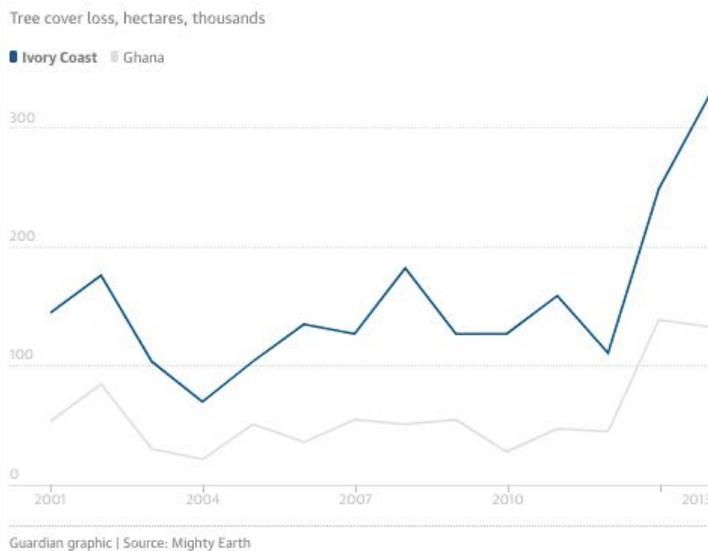
A lonely tree surrounded by cocoa in Marahoué national park, where most of the forest, formerly home to chimpanzees and other wildlife, has been cut down. Photograph: Ruth Maclean for the Guardian

The governments of Ghana and the **Ivory Coast** are formulating plans to immediately put a stop to all new deforestation after a Guardian investigation found that the cocoa industry was destroying their rainforests.

The west African neighbours have been drafting new measures to rescue their remaining forests and replant degraded ones.

In an **investigation published in September**, the Guardian found that deforestation-linked cocoa had entered the supply chains of some of the biggest players in the chocolate industry. At the same time, the environmental group **Mighty Earth** published **Chocolate's Dark Secret**, a report that found that “a large amount of the cocoa used in chocolate produced by Mars, Nestle, Hershey’s, Godiva, and other major chocolate companies was grown illegally.”

#### Tree cover loss in Ivory Coast reached 328,000 hectares in 2014



Corrupt Ivorian officials whose job it was to protect the country’s national parks and classified forests were accepting huge bribes to allow small-scale farmers to cut them down and grow cocoa.

This cocoa was then bought by middlemen who sold it on to large cocoa traders including Barry Callebaut and Cargill, companies which sell to Mars, Cadbury and Nestlé.

The action taken by the governments is very promising, Mighty Earth said, but will not succeed unless the cocoa traders and chocolate manufacturers put money into the effort.

“The big danger now is that the industry’s going to kick the can down the road and blame the Ghanaian and Ivorian governments and make them fix the problem without helping enough financially. But the people who have the money and the technical resources to fix it are the industry,” said Etelle Higonnet, the lead author of the Mighty Earth report.

Contacted by the Guardian, the chocolatiers Mars, the Hershey Company and Mondelez, the owners of Cadbury, did not say that they would commit any money to the governments’ plans; Mondelez pointed to its sustainable sourcing programme Cocoa Life, while Hershey said that more than 75% of the cocoa it buys is certified and sustainable, and that it would be at 100% by 2020. Mars said that “joint

frameworks for action” would be released at the climate change conference, outlining “the key actions, time frames, and technical and financial commitments for forest protection and restoration in **Ghana** and Cote d’Ivoire.”

Under the Ivorian draft plans, which appear to be sanctioned by the prime minister’s office, these traders will each take responsibility for a number of degraded classified forests and turn them into densely shaded forest, organising farmers to plant trees while growing cocoa underneath them.

This is a far more sustainable way of growing the cocoa on which the Ghanaian and Ivorian economies rely than the current way, whereby many farmers cut down ancient trees to ensure their cocoa plantations have full sun.

As well as the effect that the decimation of west African rainforests has on global climate change, scientists say it also **dramatically reduces rainfall**. If current patterns continue, **there will not be enough rain to grow cocoa** at all.

The handful of Ivorian classified forests that have not lost swaths of trees will be upgraded to national parks, while one national park, Marahoué, is in such a bad condition that it will probably be downgraded, perhaps to a classified forest.

It is unclear who will pay for the Ivorian government’s plans. It expects the traders to pay, but has not made it clear what the consequences will be if they refuse. The number of people living inside protected areas makes it a complicated and fraught task: the government has faced accusations of human rights abuses for evicting thousands of cocoa farmers from Mont Péko national park.

In Ghana, meanwhile, the plans are far-reaching, and if enacted, could transform the landscape, though it is unclear whether those drafting them have sufficient clout or money to do so.

In addition to committing to no new deforestation, land and tree tenure reform, and transparency in the supply chain so that cocoa can be traced down to the farm gate level, ensuring that none of it comes from illegal protected areas, the government is also agreeing to the **high carbon stock approach**. This is a way of making decisions about land use that protects low as well as high-density forest, which means that more of Ghana’s forests can be salvaged.

However, there is still less clarity on how this will be funded than in the Ivory Coast. Cocoa prices in both countries have fallen by a third in the past year, and Ghana’s economy has been affected by low gold and oil prices too, as well as a fiscal crisis that the IMF plugged with credit that so far totals \$565m. Monitoring and replanting the forests will cost tens of millions the country will struggle to afford.

Chocolate companies and traders should pay, according to Higonnet.

“The companies need to pay for planting the trees next year. They’re likely to reap a \$4bn windfall profit, because the price of chocolate bars has stayed the same but the price of cocoa is collapsing,” she said. “So what can they do with that extra money? Well, they can use it to plant trees.”

Many top players in the cocoa industry say they will release a “joint framework for action” with the governments on 17 November. But there is concern that a tightening in west **Africa** could just push the trade elsewhere.

“Cocoa is moving into these frontier forests,” Higonnet said, “in central Africa, Indonesia and the Amazon – and we will keep reproducing the same disasters that we saw in west Africa unless we protect those forests now.”

## Chocolate industry drives rainforest disaster in Ivory Coast

### Environment

**Exclusive: As global demand for chocolate booms, ‘dirty’ beans from deforested national parks have entered big business supply chains**

**‘Once this was all trees, but they burned them to plant cocoa’: the ruin of West Africa’s rainforest**

**Ruth Maclean** in *Marahoué national park, Ivory Coast*

Wed 13 Sep 2017 13.30 BST

Last modified on Thu 22 Nov 2018 14.58 GMT



Rainforest in ruin Photograph: Mighty Earth

The world's chocolate industry is driving deforestation on a devastating scale in West **Africa**, the Guardian can reveal.

Cocoa traders who sell to Mars, Nestlé, Mondelez and other big brands buy beans grown illegally inside protected areas in the **Ivory Coast**, where rainforest cover has been reduced by more than 80% since 1960.

Illegal product is mixed in with “clean” beans in the supply chain, meaning that Mars bars, Ferrero Rocher chocolates and Milka bars could all be tainted with “dirty” cocoa. As much as 40% of the world's cocoa comes from Ivory Coast.

## **'Once this was all trees, but they burned them to plant cocoa': the ruin of West Africa's rainforest**

### **Ivory Coast**

A journey into the heart of Ivory Coast reveals its forests are being ripped up to feed the growing global demand for chocolate

**Chocolate industry drives rain forest disaster in Ivory Coast**

**Ruth Maclean** in *Marahoué national park, Ivory Coast*

Wed 13 Sep 2017 13.30 BST

Last modified on Sat 18 Aug 2018 15.59 BST



A cocoa farmer who has a plantation in Mount Tia forest holds a recently harvested cocoa pod. Many traders turn a blind eye to the provenance of the produce. Photograph: Ruth Maclean for the Guardian

## S

inewy, silvery trees rise from the green landscape of Marahoué national park, their smooth trunks supporting branches only at the very top. Marahoué is one of eight national parks in [Ivory Coast](#) and 20 years ago it was covered by forest and home to chimpanzees and elephant herds.

Now it is more common to see the skeleton of a tree, slowly burnt by fire to get rid of the shadow it casts over cocoa fields, or just a sawn-off stump.

Henri, a traditional leader from the nearby town of Diafla, grew up with the forest, and speaks lovingly of its towering iroko trees – but he had a hand in destroying it. Like many others, he has cocoa plantations inside the park and employs people from Burkina Faso to work on them.

“This all used to be trees, but farmers burned them to plant cocoa,” Henri says. When he was younger, he used to see chimpanzees and elephants make their way through the park. They have been replaced by people.

Having run out of petrol on his way into Marahoué, Henri leaves his motorbike by the track and makes the rest of his journey on foot, passing herds of cattle, the ubiquitous scrappy cocoa plants, and the remains of a tourist lodge that was destroyed in 2008, shortly before the village of Zanbarmakro was founded nearby.



The remains of a burnt tree in Mont Tia forest reserve, Ivory Coast. Photograph: Ruth Maclean for the Guardian

Nobody uses the word “village” for Zanbarmakro, preferring the more temporary-sounding “camp”. But the large new church being built at one end, the mosque at the other, as well as the homes, shops and private clinic in between dispel any pretence that this place, home to 13,000 people, is not here to stay.

Mid-afternoon, men arrive on their motorbikes from the plantations and rest on the stoop of a shop selling fizzy drinks. Women spread out their wares: one, a higgledy-piggledy pile of shoes, another, a rack of scythes, the sort every child carries for harvesting. Cassava mills whirr. By some estimates there are 50 illegal villages inside the park. Zanbarmakro is one of the biggest.

Nestled at its entrance is a lookout post on stilts built years ago by the OIPR (Office Ivoirien des Parcs et Réserves), the state parks authority. Its rangers have the job of ensuring that no trees are cut down, no wild animals hunted, and certainly no villages built in the park. Strangely, they seem not to have spotted the bricks and cement for the church and mosque arrive, nor the trucks loaded with cocoa beans or timber leave.

Henri introduces Zoughory Laji Bourema, Zanbarmakro’s chief, who steps round a large white tarpaulin spread with drying cocoa on to his verandah. “I get a bit of trouble from the OIPR,” he admits, smoothing down his shiny purple boubou.

The OIPR’s rangers spend much of their time drinking tea and checking WhatsApp at the residence behind their office, a few miles from the park’s boundary. Occasionally, though, they leave their camp beds to go “hunting”. They descend on a plantation, arrest a few farmers every week, and lock them up until the community pays for their release. The ransom is well known: 100,000 francs per person (£140), or 150,000 francs if they are caught with a motorbike.

“They come into the villages, collect money – a few million francs a time – and then go again,” says Henri, searching in vain for some tree shade of a tree to protect himself from the sun. “They come [for it] in their four-wheel drives about twice a month.”

In May, locals say the bribe they handed over was the biggest ever – the equivalent of £13,000, paid to the local OIPR chief. (A request for comment from the OIPR’s chief, Colonel Tondossama Adama, did not elicit a response.)

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

[Ivory Coast deforestation: fewer trees, more beans](#)

In return, they can stay and farm cocoa, which they sell to the agents of buyers in the nearby cities of Bouaflé and Bonon, who in turn sell it to Saco, a subsidiary of [Barry Callebaut](#), which in turn supplies a string of global chocolate brands.

When approached for comment, Barry Callebaut did not deny the specific allegation that illegal deforestation cocoa had entered its supply chains and said: “There is cocoa farming happening in high conservation value areas in West [Africa](#).” Barry Callebaut restated a commitment to be totally deforestation-free by 2025.

The Guardian travelled through Ivory Coast with the [Mighty Earth group](#) to investigate the impact of cocoa on the dwindling rainforest. We both interviewed traders and managers of cooperatives who said they bought cocoa from protected areas and sold to Olam, a global agri-business. Olam acknowledged one incident it said was isolated and added that it was pursuing a string of initiatives to assure a clean supply chain.

“Olam is absolutely clear that deforestation by cocoa smallholders must be halted,” a spokesperson said, while adding nonetheless: “it is a complex and highly fragmented supply chain so the challenges of tracing back to each individual farmer are immense”.

Despite Prince Charles’s success in [extracting promises](#) from industry that they would come up with a plan to reverse deforestation, the message has not got through to cocoa producers and traders on the ground.



Farmers arrive with cocoa beans at a trader's in Taobly, Ivory Coast. The beans will eventually make their way to big chocolate companies. Photograph: Ruth Maclean for the Guardian

At one cocoa yard belonging to a buyer called Sivacco in the city of Man, men sift the beans through big metal rectangular sieves and shovel it into sacks, one wearing a Father Christmas hat. Opposite the yard is a sprawling sawmill with piles of sawdust, planks and logs, and smoke billowing out behind it.

“We definitely have cocoa from the forest reserves here,” says the yard manager, who did not want to be named. “Pisteurs (motorcyclists) bring it here and we can’t tell where exactly it comes from. We sell to all the big companies.”

Behind him is a big mural with the Rainforest Alliance symbol and a list of forbidden activities.

“We don’t care. We don’t even ask the producers where it comes from. The big companies never ask where it comes from either,” says Bamogo Arouna, a buyer in Taobly, a town on the edge of Mount Tia, a classified forest in the west of Ivory Coast. Arouna says he sells to two big exporters who sell cocoa products to companies including Nestlé, Mars and Hershey.

Farmers ride their cocoa-laden bicycles from the reserve to Arouna’s warehouse which emits the sickly raw cocoa smell that, strangely, smells nothing like chocolate. One farmer unloads a half-full sack of cocoa from his bike rack and men begin to toss it through giant sieves.

“Cocoa is cocoa,” shrugs a trader, looking over the lush landscape in front of him. “We just pay whoever has it. We don’t differentiate between forest reserves or non-forest reserves.” When he came to the area from Burkina Faso 12 years ago the view was of tropical forest; now, it’s crops. To him, it makes no difference.

“It was green when I arrived,” he says. “It’s still green.”