

'Part of German soul' under threat as forests die

Action plan to be drawn up as dry summers, storms and pests destroy swathes of woodland

Kate Connolly in Berlin

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A forester scrapes the bark of a beech tree to control pests in a forest suffering from drought stress in Höxter, western Germany.
Photograph: Ina Fassbender/AFP/Getty Images

A catastrophic combination of heat, drought, storms, forest fires, beetle plagues and a fungi blight have so far this year destroyed swathes of German forest equivalent to more than 200,000 football fields.

Forests are one of the most efficient ways to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and in **Germany** alone they are able to absorb 62 million tonnes of CO₂ – about 7% of the country's emissions – every year.

But forests have also been at the heart of Germany's cultural identity for centuries, and politicians are now seizing the issue – known as *waldsterben* (dying forest) – as a top priority.

The agriculture minister, Julia Klöckner, has announced a forest summit next month, at which national forestry and climate experts are to agree on a multimillion-euro action plan. Klöckner has pledged €500m (£460m), to be paid out of the government's energy and climate fund, to finance it.

"Our forests are massively damaged," Klöckner said, visiting Moritzburg near Dresden, which has been badly hit, many of its trees brown and dying, mainly due to drought and beetle infestations.

"Only if everyone unites will we manage the mammoth task that lies ahead of us – to save our forests not only for ourselves but for future generations," she said.

The society for the protection of the German forest, SDW, believes the extent of the destruction goes even beyond the government's estimate. It has said the trees being lost at the most rapid rate are those that make up the bulk of the forests, including spruces and firs, pines, beeches and oaks.

In last year's dry summer and this year's, the forests have been hit by a shortfall of 200 litres of rainwater per square metre, according to SDW, which Germany's meteorological service says is the driest it has been for 50 years.



Piles of logs and spruce trees in a forest in Kleinenberg, western Germany. Photograph: Ina Fassbender/AFP/Getty Images

The association of German foresters (BDF) has said German forests are close to collapse. “The forest is the best way to save the climate, but right now the forest itself is a victim of the climate catastrophe,” it said.

A third of Germany is made up of forest, or 11.4m hectares (28 macres) – about a half of which is private property.

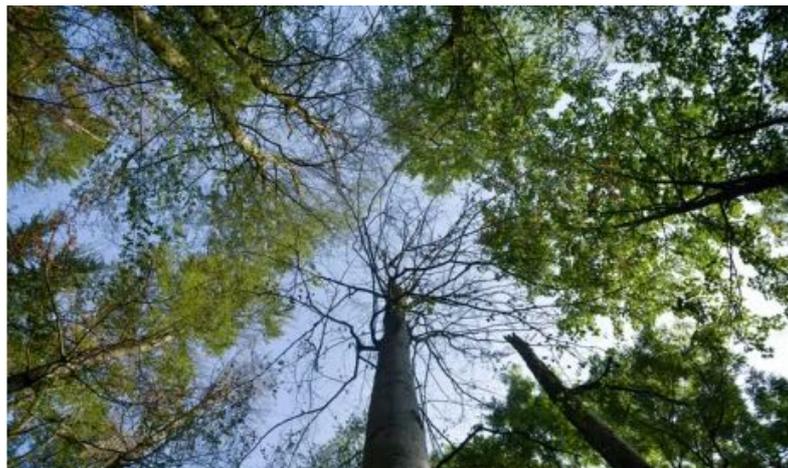
The crisis is being keenly felt, not least after a recent survey on national identity in which 50% of participants cited forests as being central to their idea of *heimat* or sense of home.

Germans have for centuries had a mythological, even spiritual, identification with their forests. Woodlands have formed the inspiration for much German music and literature –most famously the 19th-century folk tales of the Brothers Grimm. In everything from Red Riding Hood to Hansel and Gretel the forest is portrayed as a place of foreboding and threat and as well as retreat, safety and learning.

For German romanticists in the late 18th century, the forest was an important symbol of unity and purity, the word *waldeinsamkeit*, forest loneliness, embodying the sense of inner peace to be found in the forest. This was later exploited by the Nazis, who encouraged the idea of the forest as a sign of German cultural solidity, encouraging people to plant German oaks to honour Adolf Hitler.

The tabloid Bild recently published an ode to the German forest, calling it “part of the German soul”.

“It is, alas, not some made-up fairytale ... that our forest is in a state of emergency ... and if we don’t do something to save it and ourselves, we might end up with the story: ‘Once upon a time, there was a place called the German forest,’” the paper stated.



Beech trees – one of the most threatened varieties – in a forest in Warburg, western Germany. Photograph: Ina Fassbender/AFP/Getty Images

Experts are divided over the best plan of action. Solutions range from introducing more robust tree species to naturally allowing forests to adapt to the conditions. The opposition Greens are calling for a return to primeval forests – woods left to their own devices, after researchers at Zurich’s Technical University calculated that there was room on the planet for a third more forests than at present without encroaching on urban or agricultural spaces.



German police confront treehouse activists after six-year standoff

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/13/german-police-to-clear-treehouse-activists-after-six-year-standoff-environment-energy>

While owners of private forests are tending towards planting Douglas firs and northern red oaks, the Association for Environmental and Nature Protection in Germany, a leading NGO, says non-native species are an ecological risk.

The trees that are most under threat are said to be spruce, beech, ash, Norway maple and sycamore. Those most able to weather the climate crisis are robinia, plane, and sweet and horse chestnut trees.

Among those likely to be increasingly imported in future are Turkish hazel, Italian acorn, silver lime, and Lebanon cedar. The challenge is to find varieties able to cope with hot summers as well as harsh winters.

Klößner believes that as many varieties as possible are necessary, referring to experts who say nature cannot be left to cope on its own. “We need mixed forests and trees that are adapted to their habitat,” she said.

Tanja Sanders, an expert in forest ecology who researches what the forest of the future might look like, said: “Forests are a vital part of our lives. They form groundwater, give us wood, filter the air, reduce CO₂ and the temperature and offer space for species conservation and human relaxation. But we must face up to having to say goodbye to the forest as we’ve known it.”

Greta Thunberg takes climate fight to Germany's threatened Hambach Forest

The Observer
Greta Thunberg

The felling of ancient woodland to make way for a giant coal mine brings together two linked battles for the activist

Emma Graham-Harrison

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Greta Thunberg, centre, with Luisa Neubauer, right, and other German activists in the Hambach Forest. Photograph: Oliver Berg/AFP/Getty Images

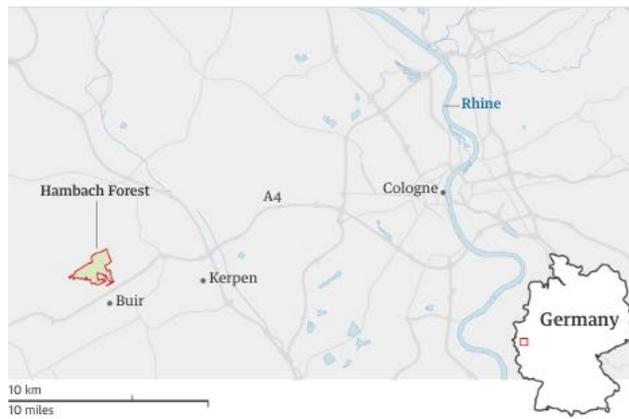
Greta Thunberg started her long journey to climate summits in the Americas by joining a treetop protest in Germany's Hambach forest, where environmentalists have been fighting for years to stop the ancient woodland being torn up for open-cast coal mining.

The battle to save the last remaining oak and hornbeam trees reflects the young activist's entwined fights to protect the natural world from human exploitation and to halt carbon emissions.

"The Hambach Forest is so important because it's so symbolic," Thunberg told the *Observer*, standing under treehouses where activists live year-round to stop the trees being felled. "[The mining here] is such a huge contribution to the ecological crisis and the climate crisis."

Earlier the 16-year-old Swede – who is about to set sail for the US and Chile to attend UN climate summits – had visited the mine, an open wasteland that stretches for kilometres, taking in both former forest and former farmland. She met people from the surrounding area whose villages are also due to be razed to make way for the mine.

"I have visited coal mines before, but this was so huge and so devastating to see," she said. "It makes me incredibly sad, to see all this destruction, in this area that used to be a forest ecosystem, and I feel sorry for the people who have to move."



The area, near Cologne in western Germany, is home to endangered species, including Bechstein's bats, but its trees and fern-filled clearings also represent a rare remaining sliver of a woodland ecosystem that once filled this part of the Rhine river plain.

Since mining began in 1978 the Hambach – or Hambi as activists affectionately call it – has shrunk to only 10% of the original 13,500 acres. The rest was cleared to allow the utility firm RWE to extract the "brown coal" or lignite lying beneath, at a rate of about 40m tonnes a year.

The trees are felled and the forest floor torn up to reach coal deposits, leaving long gashes of open earth, that mark out the mine on satellite photographs with streaks of black and ochre. The lignite, along with supplies taken from other mines in the area, is burned in nearby power stations. Three, the Niederaußem, Neurath and Weisweiler plants, are all individually among the 10 biggest carbon dioxide emitters in Europe. Together they make the region's coal the continent's biggest source of the greenhouse gas, the activists say.

For more than seven years a committed group have been living in some of the oldest, tallest trees, serving as human shields against RWE.

When Thunberg won Germany's Golden Camera award in March, she dedicated it to the Hambach activists, who invited her to come and see their struggle for herself, and she started her trip to the Americas by taking up that offer.

After visiting the mine she joined activists in one of the highest protest sites, lifted 15 metres off the ground in a climbing harness to a wooden house in the high branches of a centuries-old oak tree.

Jana Boltersdorf, a 17-year-old protester who has been coming to the forest for years, said Thunberg's visit was a "surreal" inspiration.

"She has become a great symbol for climate justice, and this forest also has become a great symbol for climate justice," Boltersdorf said. "Now those two great symbols which are very important to my life are coming together. It doesn't feel real."

Several times the treehouses have all been cleared and their occupants arrested, and several times the activists have returned to their perches. But in 2018, the regular showdown captured national attention, said Luisa Neubauer, one of the leaders of the Fridays for Future youth movement in Germany.



David Dresen holding a sign that says 'Let the villagers stay' in the partly cleared Hambach Forest. Photograph: Emma Graham-Harrison/The Observer

And when it reached the national stage, the battle for Hambach brought the climate crisis into focus for many Germans, she believes, by connecting intangible carbon emissions to something both tangible and much loved.

"Wild forest in Germany is a very important part of our culture, of our understanding of what this country is," Neubauer, said. "It's impossible [for many people] to imagine protecting the climate, but it is possible to imagine protecting the forest."

Its destruction seems shortsighted as Germany pivots away from coal, which still provides about a third of the country's electricity. With a target to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 40% compared with 1990 levels, by next year, Berlin needs to act urgently.

A government-appointed commission said last month that Germany should shut down all of its coal-fired power plants by 2038, and recommended setting aside €40bn (£37bn) in aid to help areas affected by the shutdowns, where the mining and power industries are major employers.

That new deadline has brought both frustration and hope for the forest protesters and people in villages around the area, whose homes had been slated for destruction.

David Dresen, 28, has given up his job as a maths teacher to campaign for Kuckum, the village where his family have lived in the same farmhouse since the 1700s. Along with six others in the area it is due to be destroyed in 2027, but what once seemed like an almost hopeless fight now feels less bleak.

"We have been fighting lignite since the 1980s and for a long time no one heard what we said," he said after meeting Thunberg. "If this movement is able to save the forest, why should it not be possible to save our villages?"

What remains of the forest has been given a stay of execution, but this is only temporary. With the confrontations between protesters and police gaining widespread publicity, and a case brought by environmentalists making its way through the courts, RWE has agreed a moratorium until 2020.

Thunberg will be attending climate summits in New York in September and Santiago in December. She does not fly because of the carbon footprint this leaves, and so will travel overland to the UK, cross the Atlantic on a racing yacht, and finally travel by train and bus to Chile. "I have not sailed before, so I'm going now to get some basic lessons on what to do and what not to do," she said. "But the people I'm going with are professionals so I'm not worried about safety."

Climate protesters storm Garzweiler coalmine in Germany

23 June 2019



Hundreds of protesters joined forces to break into the mine and march through it

Police in western Germany are removing climate change protesters from an open-cast coalmine after hundreds of them stormed the site.

Activists broke through a police cordon on Saturday to get into the Garzweiler mine, in a campaign against fossil fuel use.

Many protesters are resisting attempts by police to clear the huge site.

Police have warned that the mine is not safe, and said some officers were hurt as they tried to hold back protesters.

Germany has vowed to go carbon neutral by 2050 but activists say this is not soon enough.

Recent surveys have shown that climate change tops a list of concerns in Germany, with the Green party polling alongside the governing Christian Democrats.



Police tried to hold back protesters from entering the mine, which they said was dangerous

Police used pepper spray to try to stop activists from reaching the site. Each side accused the other of using unnecessary force.

Earlier, protesters temporarily blocked a railway line used to transport coal.

Some of the activists were among between 20,000 and 40,000 protesters who joined a demonstration on Friday in the city of Aachen in support of the school strike movement launched by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg.



Dressed in white protective clothing, protesters ran over the sides of the mine to enter the premises



After storming the mine, activists used foil blankets to shield themselves from the sun



Climate activists blocked the rail tracks leading to the Hambach surface mine



Police on horseback were on duty at the coal mine