

# Global deforestation pledge will be missed without urgent action, say researchers

**Destruction of forests slowed in 2021 but not enough to meet 2030 commitment made by 145 countries**



Aerial view of deforestation in Mato Grosso state, Brazil, in July 2021. Photograph: Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

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The destruction of global forests slowed in 2021 but the vital climate goal of ending deforestation by 2030 will still be missed without urgent action, according to [an assessment](#).

The area razed in 2021 fell by 6.3% after progress in some countries, notably Indonesia. But almost 7m hectares were lost and the destruction of the most carbon- and biodiversity-rich tropical rainforests fell by only 3%. The

CO<sub>2</sub> emissions resulting from the lost trees were equivalent to the emissions of the entire European Union plus Japan.

Global heating could not be limited to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels without ending deforestation, experts said. At the UN's Cop26 climate summit in Glasgow last year, 145 countries **pledged to end the felling of forests** by the end of the decade. The demolition and degradation of forests causes about 10% of global carbon emissions.

However, based on current trends, the **Glasgow leaders' declaration** would be as "hollow" as the pledge made by countries in 2014 to end deforestation by 2020, the assessment's authors said.

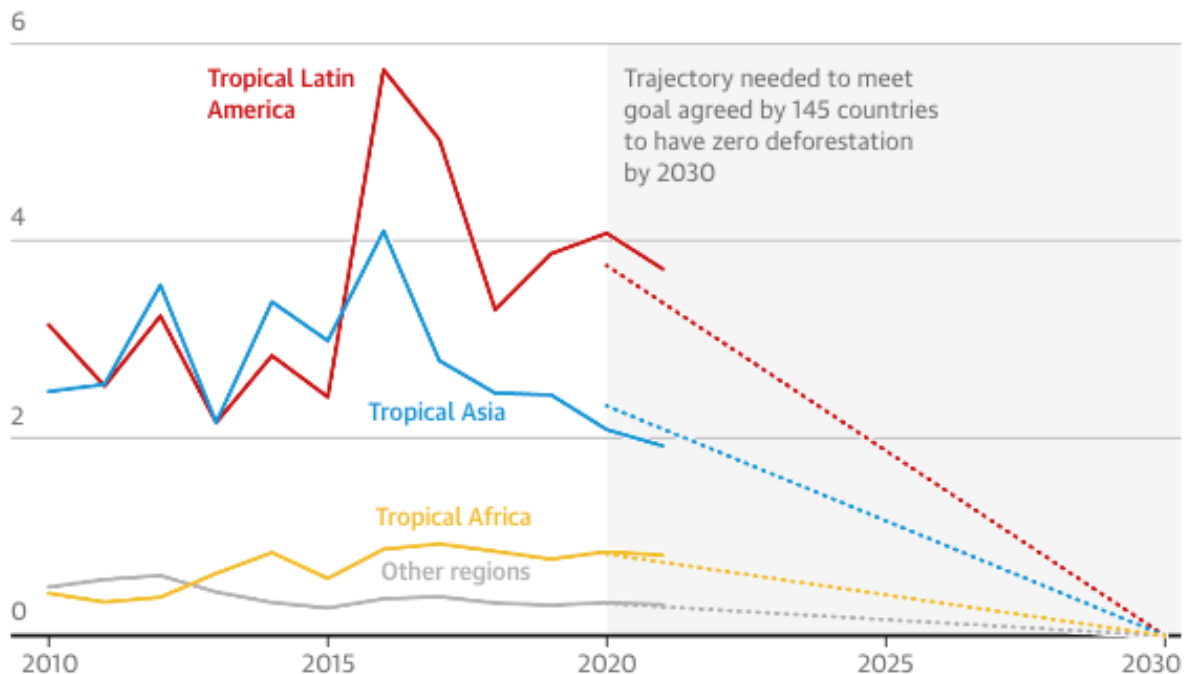
There was little clarity or transparency of the measures being taken to end deforestation and only 1% of the required funding was being provided, they said, and most importantly a lack of political will.

Erin Matson at Climate Focus, a policy group and one of the coalition of organisations that conducted the assessment, said: "The [Glasgow declaration] was a big moment, the first time such a target had been embraced at the leaders level by so many countries, covering 90% of global forests.

"But we are not on track. There has been some modest improvement, but even this could just be temporary. Many countries are putting their progress at risk by phasing out or rolling back protections. For example, Indonesia **did not renew its palm oil moratorium** after it expired in September 2021 and a recently adopted law on job creation poses a serious threat to natural forests."

## The destruction of forests is falling but not fast enough to reach the agreed zero target by 2030

Deforestation in million hectares a year



Guardian graphic. Source: Forest declaration assessment/WRI. Note: trajectory to reach zero deforestation by 2030 – a 10% a year decrease starting in 2020, based on a 2018-20 average

The largest area of destroyed forest in 2021 was in Brazil, where deforestation has risen under president Jair Bolsonaro, having fallen under his predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The election contest between the two men, on 30 October, has been described by scientists as likely to **determine the fate of the Amazon**. “The stakes are high,” Matson said.

David Gibbs, a research associate at the World Resources Institute’s (WRI) Global Forest Watch, said: “We are quickly moving toward another round of hollow commitments and vanished forests.”

Fran Price, at the World Wildlife Fund, said: “There is no pathway to meeting the 1.5C target or reversing biodiversity loss without halting deforestation and conversion. It is time for bold leadership and daring solutions.”

Four of the top five countries with the largest areas of deforestation – Brazil, Bolivia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Paraguay – increased the destruction in 2021.

However, “exceptional progress” in some countries showed the 2030 goal was still possible, the authors said. Indonesia, the only country to cut deforestation in each of the past five years, and its neighbour Malaysia, reduced forest destruction by about 25% in 2021. As a result, tropical Asia is the only region on track for zero deforestation by 2030.

A drive to end the razing of forests for cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast and Ghana helped deforestation fall by 47% and 13% respectively, while new national parks and measures to fight illegal logging led to a 28% fall in Gabon. Tropical Latin America, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Guatemala also reported cuts in deforestation in 2021.

“We have the data and we know what interventions work – the missing element is the political will to actually undertake those actions,” said Frances Seymour at WRI.

The measures include government bans combined with effective enforcement, collaborations with the beef, soy, timber and other commodity companies whose products are most linked to deforestation, international trade measures and the strengthening of the land rights of Indigenous and other local people.

Countries backing the Glasgow declaration pledged to quadruple annual funding to tackle deforestation but no information was yet available on how these pledges would be met, the authors said.

Only a quarter of the biggest global companies in the agriculture sector have announced strong policies to eliminate deforestation from their supply chains and just 20% of these are close to meeting their commitments.

The new **forest declaration assessment** used data on permanent tree cover loss around the world to create a baseline from 2018-20. To get to zero deforestation by 2030 requires a fall of 10% a year, meaning the current slowing of deforestation is insufficient.

Forest cover has increased in some countries since 2000 but less than the area lost. New forests could not offset the huge carbon storage and biodiversity of existing natural forests, the authors said.

Protecting intact **forests had even more climate benefits than just the CO<sub>2</sub> stored**, said Seymour, thanks to their role in producing cloud cover that cools the planet. “If we take the non-carbon processes into account, they amplify the cooling effect of ending tropical forest loss by about 50%,” she said.

Michael Wolosin, at **Conservation** International, said: “That 50% cooling bonus should be included by forest countries in their accounting to gain the recognition and finance they deserve for the services their forests are providing to the world.”

- 24 October 2022
- Clarification [25 October 2022](#)

## **Deforestation slowed last year — but not enough to meet climate goals**

**Report finds that most nations are not on track to meet global pledge to protect Earth’s forests.**

- [Natasha Gilbert](#)
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Deforested areas rim a highway running through the state of Amazonas in Brazil. Credit: Michael Dantas/AFP/Getty



Countries are failing to meet international targets to stop global forest loss and degradation by 2030, [according to a report](#). It is the first to measure progress since [world leaders set the targets last year](#) at the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, UK. Preserving forests, which can store carbon and, in some cases, provide local cooling, is a crucial part of a larger strategy to curb global warming.



Tropical forests have big climate benefits beyond carbon storage

The analysis, called the Forest Declaration Assessment, shows that the rate of global deforestation slowed by 6.3% in 2021, compared with the baseline average for 2018–20. But this “modest” progress falls short of the

annual 10% cut needed to end deforestation by 2030, says Erin Matson, a consultant at Climate Focus, an advisory company headquartered in Amsterdam, and an author of the assessment, published on 24 October.

“It’s a good start, but we are not on track,” Matson said at a press briefing, although she cautioned that the assessment looks at only one year’s worth of data. A clearer picture of deforestation trends will emerge in successive years, she added.

The assessment, which was carried out by a number of civil-society and research groups, including the World Resources Institute, an environmental think tank in Washington DC, comes as nations gear up for the next big climate summit (COP27), due to be held in November in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. Scientists agree that to limit global warming to 1.5–2 °C above pre-industrial levels — a threshold beyond which Earth’s climate will become profoundly disrupted — deforestation must end.

### **Tropical forests are key**

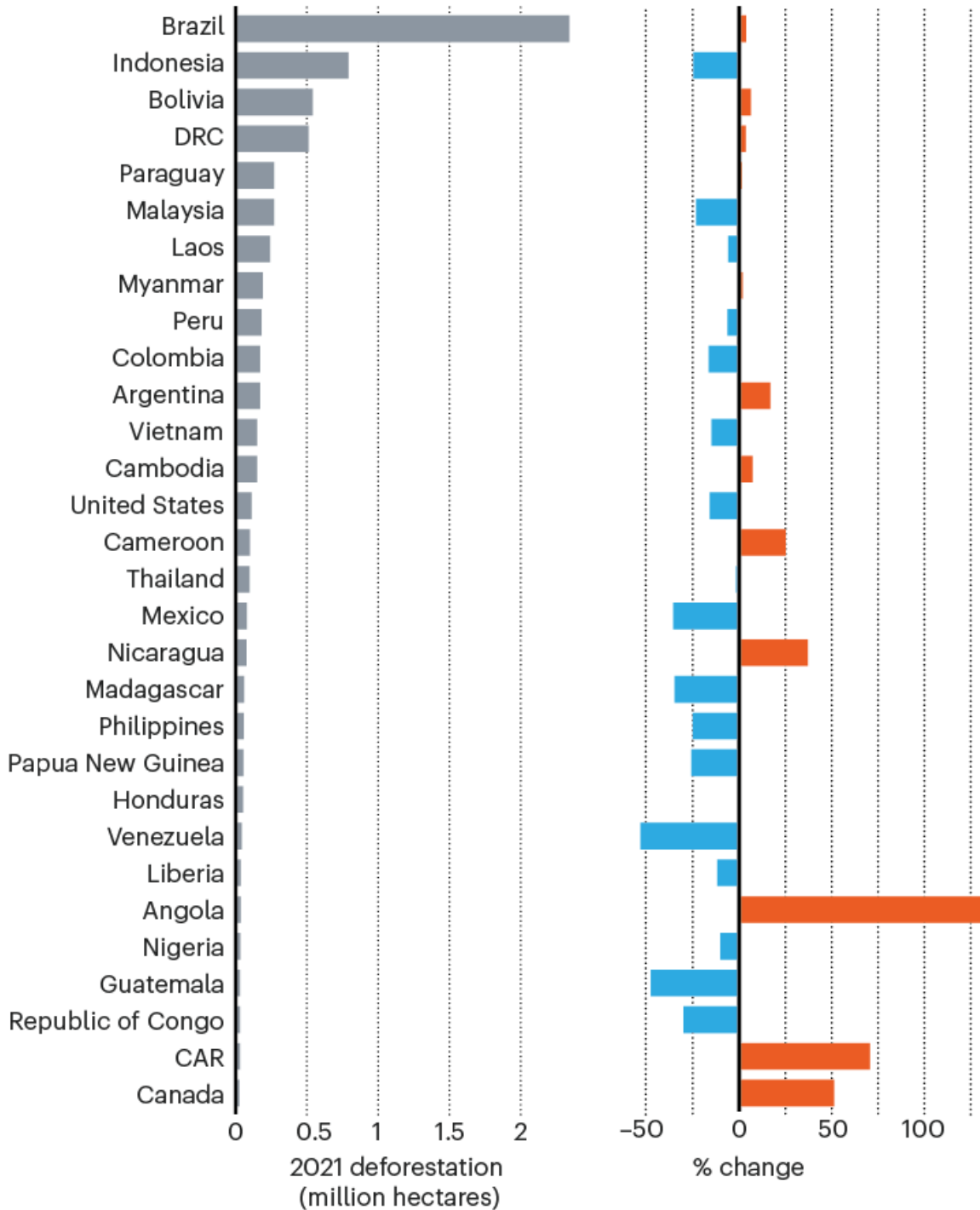
To track deforestation over the past year, the groups analysed indicators such as changes in forest canopy, as measured by satellite data, and the Forest Landscape Integrity Index, which is a measure of the ecological health of forests. The slow progress they found is

attributable mainly to a few tropical countries where deforestation is highest (see 'Progress report'). Among them is Brazil — the world's largest contributor to tree loss — which saw a 3% rise in the rate of deforestation in 2021, compared with the baseline years. Rates also rose in heavy deforesters Bolivia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by 6% and 3%, respectively, over the same period.



## PROGRESS REPORT

Last year, nations including Venezuela decreased their deforestation rates compared with 2018–20, according to the latest Forest Declaration Assessment. Others, such as Angola, saw an increase. Although Brazil didn't show a large increase, its total deforestation rate each year remains high, making it the world's largest contributor to the number of trees lost.



DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo, CAR: Central African Republic

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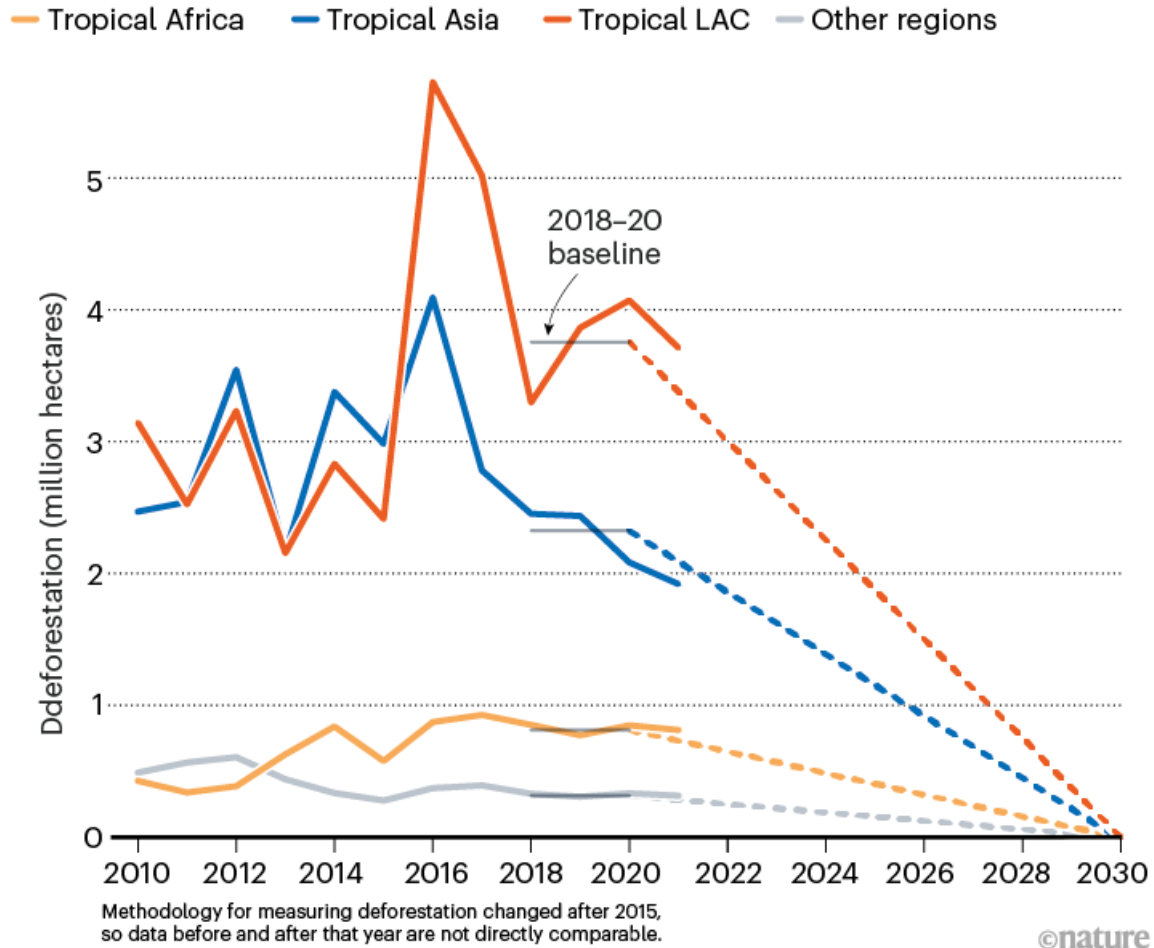
Adapted from the [2022 Forest Declaration Assessment](#)

The loss of tropical forests, in particular, is worrisome because [a growing body of research shows](#) that besides sequestering carbon, these forests can physically cool nearby areas by creating clouds, humidifying the air and releasing certain cooling molecules. Keeping tropical forests standing provides a massive boost to global cooling that current policies ignore, [says a report](#) released alongside the Forest Declaration Assessment.

A region made up of tropical countries in Asia is the only one on track to halt deforestation by 2030, according to the assessment (see 'Movement towards goal'). The region cut the rate at which it lost humid, old-growth forests last year by 20% from the 2018–20 baseline, mostly thanks to large strides made by Indonesia — normally one of the world's largest contributors to deforestation — where the loss of old-growth forests fell by 25% in 2021 compared with the previous year.

## MOVEMENT TOWARDS GOAL

The vast majority of deforestation takes place in the tropical regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Although the deforestation rate decreased in these regions last year, the only one on track to achieve the global goal of ending forest loss by 2030 is tropical Asia.



Adapted from the [2022 Forest Declaration Assessment](#)

“The progress we see is driven by exceptional results in some countries,” Matson said.

Efforts by the government and corporations in Indonesia to address the environmental harms of palm-oil production were key to progress, the assessment says. For example, as of 2020, more than 80% of palm-oil refiners had promised not to cut down or degrade any more forests. And in 2018, the Indonesian government

imposed a moratorium on new palm-oil plantations. However, this ban expired last year, raising concerns that progress might eventually be reversed.

### **Finance lagging**

Global demand for commodities such as beef, fossil fuels and timber drive much of the forest loss that occurs today, as industry seeks to clear trees for new pastures and resource extraction. Matson said that many governments haven't introduced reforms, such as protected-area regulations or fiscal incentives to encourage the private sector to safeguard forests, and that this is stalling progress.

“Stronger mandatory action is needed,” she said.



How much can forests fight climate change?

In particular, nations are lagging behind in terms of fiscal support for forest protection and restoration. On the basis of previous assessments, the report estimates that forest conservation efforts require somewhere between US\$45 billion and \$460 billion per year if nations are to meet the 2030 goal. At present, commitments average less than 1% of what is needed per year, it concludes.

Matson said that nations need to improve transparency on financing by setting interim milestones and publicly reporting progress. Michael Wolosin, a climate-solutions adviser at Conservation International, a non-profit environmental organization headquartered in Arlington,



Virginia, would like to see donor countries recommit to their forest finance pledges at COP27 this year.

However, Constance McDermott, an environmental-change researcher at the University of Oxford, UK, cautions against focusing too much on “estimates of forest cover change and dollars spent”. Social equity for Indigenous people and those in local communities should be part of discussions relating to deforestation, but is mostly missing, she says. More effort is needed to support these communities' own efforts to practice responsible forest stewardship by strengthening land rights and addressing land-use challenges that they identify, she adds.

Otherwise, McDermott warns that “global efforts to stop deforestation are more than likely to reinforce global, national and local inequalities”.

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