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Tropical forests 'better managed'



By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News

The world's tropical forests are better managed now than five years ago, concludes a survey by the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO).

The area under some form of sustainable management plan increased by about 50% over the period; but about 90% of tropical forest lacks protection.



The recent vote to reduce forest protection in Brazil brought protests from environmental campaigners

The most significant improvements have been seen in Africa, the report says.

The ITTO is a pro-sustainable use trade body whose 60 member countries account for 90% of the global timber trade.

Its current report - Status of Tropical Forest Management 2011 - analysed data from 33 important forest countries, including the really big players such as Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia.

"The top line is that the area under sustainable forest management has gone up from 36 to 53 million hectares in five years," said Duncan Poore, one of the report's authors and a former head of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"That's a substantial improvement, but there's still a long way to go," he told BBC News.

"Forests scheduled by ITTO members as permanent forest cover 760m hectares - so what's under sustainable management is less than 10%, which is disappointing."

Deforestation 'to continue'

Countries that have made major increases in protection include Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, Peru and Venezuela.

However, satellite observations recently revealed an alarming escalation in deforestation in Brazil, indicating that loss of forest in some areas of a country can continue even as protection increases in other areas.

"My personal view is that it's more important to make sure that countries decide what forest they want to keep and for what purpose, and look after that satisfactorily, than to weep crocodile tears over deforestation," said Dr Poore.

"The reality is that in most countries, deforestation is going to continue. But if they look after areas that are really important ecologically, that may not be a problem."

The ITTO report makes clear that pressures leading to forest clearance are continuing to rise, with the expansion of the world's population, growing use of raw materials such as wood, and increasing demand for land on which to settle and grow food.

The big hope of many in the conservation community is that rich countries may soon start funding poorer ones to protect forests in the interests of absorbing carbon dioxide and curbing climate change.

But despite years of discussion, establishment of an international mechanism for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) remains elusive, largely because of wider disagreements within the UN climate convention.

Bringing a REDD scheme into existence would, said Dr Poore, be "very important" for the long-term health of tropical forests.