

Deforestation

Cloudbridge Nature Reserve - Nature Notes No. 2

During the past 40 years, more than two-thirds of Costa Rica's original forests have been destroyed, cut at a rate of between 362 sq km (140 sq mi) and 765 sq km (295 sq mi) per year. Forests have traditionally been considered unproductive land, and their destruction was for a long time synonymous with development. During the 1970s and 1980s, international and domestic development policies fueled the destruction of large tracts of wilderness. Fortunately, Costa Rican conservationists became alarmed by that deforestation, and in the 1970s they began creating what has since grown to become the region's best national parks system.

Thanks to public and private efforts, and Costa Rica's laws restricting cutting down trees, the rate of destruction has dropped significantly. However poaching and illegal logging continue to be serious problems that, if left uncorrected, will eventually wipe out many important species and wild areas. Deforestation not only spells disaster for the jaguar and the eagle, but it can also have grave consequences for human beings.

Forests absorb the rains and release water slowly, playing an important role in regulating the flow of rivers, which is why severely deforested regions often suffer floods during the rainy season and drought during the dry months. A forest's tree cover also prevents topsoil erosion, thus keeping the land fertile and productive, and in many parts of the country, erosion has left once-productive farmland almost worthless.

The loss of the forest also disrupts the carbon cycle. Living trees take up the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and with other processes create the carbohydrates, fats, and proteins which we need to live. When the trees are burned or when they rot, they release the carbon as CO₂. Since so many trees are being cut down, there is a great deal of carbon released into the air, which causes an increase in the atmospheric CO₂ concentration and global warming.

Finally, hidden within the country's flora and fauna are countless understudied substances that could eventually be extracted to cure diseases and serve humankind. The destruction of Costa Rica's forests is a loss for the entire world.

