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# ITTO Tropical Forest UPDATE

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*A newsletter from the International Tropical Timber Organization to promote the conservation and sustainable development of tropical forests*

## Why so glum?

FROGS aren't well known for their sense of humour, but they might need to develop one in coming decades. Perhaps more than any other order of animals, frogs and toads are under threat—from phenomena like climate change and habitat destruction and a mysterious fungus called *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*. Several rainforest species have gone missing in recent years and others are becoming rarer: according to the recent Global Amphibian Assessment, 1653 of the 5067 known frog and toad species globally are either threatened or extinct.

This edition of the *TFU* is not about frogs. But these moist and vocal creatures are as good a symbol as any of the challenges facing advocates of natural tropical forests. Forests continue to be cleared, and those that remain are increasingly fragmented and, in many cases, declining in quality.

Should we be concerned? What happens if, say, another 50% of the world's tropical forests are cleared?

It will be a mixed bag. Probably we will lose more frogs, and a host of other plant and animal species; nobody knows how many or to what effect. More carbon will be released into the



ITTO

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## Regular features




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**Cover image** *Photo: C. Vega, Conservation International*

## ... Editorial continued

atmosphere, contributing to possible climate change, although emissions from fossil fuels will spew out much more. The lifestyles of people living in or near destroyed forests will transform dramatically: some will lose important sources of income, sustenance and cultural heritage, but others will see their incomes grow as agriculture and industry replace the forest. Downstream towns and cities might notice a decline in the quality of their water, but they might also undergo increased development on the back of the agro-industrial expansion.

We know that while forests tend to be undervalued at a national level when they are widespread, they are regarded more and more highly as they disappear and as the nations themselves become richer. In many tropical countries we might therefore expect deforestation rates to eventually slow and perhaps even reverse—as they have done in Europe and the United States.

But there is also a risk that deforestation will go so far that the environmental and social problems it causes become intractable. It might sound like a contradiction, but the best outcomes for forests will occur when deforestation is done well. This means that the agriculture that replaces the forest should be well suited to the climate and soils and the economic benefits distributed fairly. Moreover, the forests that remain should be ecologically viable, well-managed and capable of sustaining a large proportion of their original biological diversity.

They should also be economically viable. Since its inception ITTO has been helping countries to receive greater value from their timber exports, but in many forests timber alone won't do it. In this *TFU* Alf Leslie (page 14) predicts the future demand for forest goods and services; by his reckoning, global demand for forest environmental services will be worth US$2.6 trillion in 2040. Even if this number—which no doubt will be controversial—is out by orders of magnitude, the implications are immense; forests will one day be so valuable they will be almost untouchable.

But, as Leslie points out, realising the power of environmental services as an economic driver needs actual money to change hands; while most of us agree we need these services, so far we've not been good at paying for them. Usually if you don't pay for a service you don't get it. So the forests are removed.

At the moment one of the big hopes for payments rests with carbon. As Hwan Ok Ma reports (page 32), the Kyoto Protocol has finally come into effect and developed countries can now use the Clean Development Mechanism to help offset their carbon emissions. One option is to finance afforestation and reforestation (but not natural-forest) projects in the tropics; this might increase the income earned from planted forests, but the extent to which it will do so is still unclear. Even more unclear is how this might help or hinder natural forest management.

ITTO continues to focus its efforts on the permanent part of the forest estate, funding projects to support management in both timber-production and protected forests along with a host of other related activities (page 17). In Malaysia, progress is being made in improving the quality of forest management; efforts towards the certification of forest concessions in Sarawak are reported on page 12. And an ITTO mission to Cambodia, which presents its findings on page 3, concludes that the ban on industrial concessions there, while courageous, should now be lifted, partly because "a small number of well-managed, large concessions will contribute to national sustainable development goals and bring benefits to local people".

'Well-managed' is the key term: if the forests that owners decide to keep are looked after, many of the disasters that could arise from deforestation might be avoided. 'Well-managed' usually also means 'well-funded': increasing the capacity of the forestry and land-use planning sectors should therefore remain the priority of those concerned enough about tropical forests to put money towards them. With good management, maybe the frogs won't need to be so glum, and fewer than expected will croak.

**Alastair Sarre**