

Report shows global rainforest destruction increased sharply in 2020

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Brazil once more topped the list for annual primary forest loss with 1.7 million hectares in 2020, more than three times the next highest country and a hike of 25 percent from 2019. (Photo: Brazilian army via Reuters)

New York, April 1 (RHC)-- An area of pristine rainforest the size of the Netherlands was burned or hacked down last year, as the destruction of the planet's tropical forests accelerated despite a global economic slowdown, according to new research.

The worst losses were in Brazil, three times higher than the next highest country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, according to a report published on Wednesday from Global Forest Watch based on satellite data.

Across the tropics, the study registered the destruction in 2020 of 4.2 million hectares (10.4 million acres) of primary forest – 12 percent higher than the year before. Ecosystems straddling the equator shelter abundant biodiversity and store vast amounts of carbon.

In total, the tropics lost 12.2 million hectares of tree cover – including forests and plantations – last year, driven largely by agriculture. But researchers said extreme heat and drought also stoked huge fires that consumed swaths of forest across Australia, Siberia and deep into the Amazon.

These losses are a “climate emergency. They’re a biodiversity crisis, a humanitarian disaster, and a loss of economic opportunity,” said Frances Seymour of the World Resources Institute, which is behind the report.

The study found some evidence that COVID-19 restrictions may have had an effect around the world – with an increase in illegal harvesting because forests were left less protected, or the return of large numbers of people to rural areas.

But researchers said there was little sign that the pandemic had changed the trajectory of forest destruction and warned that the worst could be still to come if countries slash protections in an attempt to ramp up economic growth. Seymour said the most “ominous signal” from the 2020 data is the instances of forests themselves falling victim to climate change. “I mean, wetlands are burning,” she said in a press briefing. “Nature has been whispering this risk to us for a long time. But now she is shouting.”

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