

**The Issue of Deforestation: An Analysis**

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“I went to the woods because I wish to live deliberately,  
to front only the essential facts, and not, when I came to  
die, discover that I had not lived.”

-Henry David Thoreau (Walden)

The natural environment is encountering many different struggles and hardships. The number of offenses against nature seems to be increasing proportionally with increasing human population. The more people that inhabit the earth and require space and resources to live, the more trees and other natural resources are going to feel the repercussions. Since agriculture began the activities of humans have reduced the earth's forests cover by about one-quarter. (Miller, 643)

Deforestation is one environmental concern that has developed into a disaster with the exponential increase of the human population. The forests are essentially the life-blood of the world. Forests are considered natural resources, but are only such if the rate of tree growth exceeds the rate of tree harvesting and cutting. Trees are harvested for a number of uses, but mostly to provide lumber for developed countries and fuel for developing countries. Other motives are the need to clear land for grazing, mining and development.

Trees function as natural lungs that absorb carbon dioxide from the air and moisture from the soil and release oxygen and water vapor into the air while performing the process of photosynthesis using the energy from the sun. Trees also act as natural sponges that absorb and retain water and soil, preventing flooding and erosion. Forests regulate and greatly effect the climate of an area

by the release of water during transpiration. Above tropical forests, 50% to 80% of the moisture in the air is from transpiration, eliminating these trees would greatly affect the precipitation levels, humidity, and temperature of the area.

So what is the price of a tree? The lumber companies can make around 600 dollars off a typical tree, but many would argue, myself included, that this is nowhere near the value of a tree. In one study, the same tree, over the course of its lifetime, provides \$196,250 worth of ecological benefits in the form of oxygen, air purification, soil fertility, erosion control, and wildlife habitats. While this number may be only a little more accurate, it is more accurate than the number given by the timber industry which values it only for what it can be made into as opposed to what it is naturally. (Miller, 645-6)

Trees cannot, in my opinion, be looked at as simply a resource to be used and replaced to facilitate future use. Trees are not simply wood and leaves, but are complex organisms that are part of a much bigger whole. The ecosystems that trees are a part of will cease to exist as trees become more and more commodified. Even if a tree is planted for every tree that is cut, the ecosystems that the trees help to support do not stand a chance. Countless species of animals, insects, bacterium, plants, fungi, and other creatures, both known and unknown will not be able to survive and thrive if their natural wild habitat is harvested and replaced with tree farms. These creatures will cease to exist.

Deforestation can be broken into primary and secondary causes that are interrelated and founded on a couple factors. Population growth, poverty and

industrialization are the primary causes of deforestation. These causes often create secondary causes that include road building, unsustainable peasant farming, cash cropping, grazing cattle, tree plantations, flooding from dams, and mining and drilling for fossil fuels. Therefore, the cause of the problem, as usual, is not cut-and-dry, but is a combination of many different elements.

Deforestation is not to be blamed on the lumber industry, or on government policy. These entities, in theory, are merely agents of our social and economic systems. If the members of our capitalistic society remove or augment the levels of demand, then the supply will fall, and eventually the harvesting will stop. The overpopulation of the ecosystem by the human species coupled with the species intense materialistic nature seems to be at the root of the problem. Therefore, if we learn to consume less energy and resources then the environment can begin to recover. However, the United States is the worst offender, making up only 5% of the world's population and consuming 33% of the world's paper. (Mills, 4)

Deforestation can be curbed by a number of control measures or regulations. This, in my opinion, is only a band-aid for a larger problem that is much harder to solve. The worldwide governments can regulate deforestation and ban the destruction of what few remaining rainforests are left. According to the NRDC, "Over 40% of all tropical forests have been destroyed and another acre is lost each second." (Mills, 4) If this number is even remotely accurate, there is no time to lose; measures should be taken immediately. I believe that

this should only be one step in a multistep process. The regulation would be a way to slow the change while the other steps are allowed to catch up.

What the world needs in order to save the forests is the same thing the world needs in order to solve a whole slew of other environmental and social crises. What the world needs now is a shift in values and goals. We all have to realize that money doesn't bring happiness and that bigger isn't necessarily better. What we need is a cure from the disease that is infesting us, our materialism.

With a shift in our values, the stage will be set for a redistribution of wealth, eliminating extreme wealth along side extreme poverty. This will result in a society that does not seek growth for its own sake, but embraces quality over quantity, then we will be in a position to truly become stewards of the environment. Until that "paradigm change" we are merely placing band-aids, or in this case tourniquets, on the problem.

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