



Press backgrounder

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Logging as a cause of rainforest fires

One of the major factors behind forest fires in tropical rainforests of Indonesia and the Amazon is the opening up of forest areas by industrial logging. Widespread fires in tropical rainforests decrease biodiversity and impoverish local communities. They also contribute to the carbon emissions that cause global warming, while the smoke and haze impair the health of millions of people.

A recent article about fires in the Amazon in the science journal, *Nature* states, "Both logging and fire increase forest vulnerability to future burning and release forest carbon stocks to the atmosphere, potentially doubling net carbon emissions from regional land use during severe El Nino episodes.... Logging also increases forest flammability by reducing forest leaf canopy coverage by 14-50%, allowing sunlight to penetrate to the forest floor, where it dries out the organic debris created by the logging." (Nepstad et al, *Nature* April 1999)

Similar forces are at work in Indonesia, which has suffered severe forest fires in recent years. Indonesian forestry experts estimate that plantation firms using fire to clear land illegally are responsible for up to 80 per cent of the fires now burning in Sumatra and Indonesian Borneo (Reuters, 10 August 1999).

Conservative estimates put the damage of the Indonesian forest fires plus the 'haze' for 1997/98 alone at over US\$4.4 billion, equivalent to about 2.5% of Indonesia's GDP at the time. This figure, based on lost timber, agricultural production, water values and non timber forest products does not include loss of life, damage to health, malnutrition due to crop destruction or biodiversity depletion. (DTE, August 1999)

Over 80% of the Indonesian forest fires in 1997/98 were lit by private companies. No government action has been taken against the 176 logging and plantation companies named by the Forestry Minister as responsible for illegally starting the fires. A recent report on logging in Indonesia estimates that 60 per cent of the industrial logging in Indonesia is illegal. (ITFMP 1999)

Globally, forests house an enormous store of carbon, roughly 500 billion tonnes of carbon above ground, and 1500 billion tonnes in forest soils. Most of this is in the ancient forests of the boreal region and the tropical rainforests. This carbon store is larger than all the fossil fuels that have been burnt in the last hundred years.

Destruction of the world's forests is a major contributor to greenhouse gases. The forest fires that burned throughout Indonesia in 1997 and 1998 may have released more carbon than all the fossil fuels burnt in Europe in the same year. ([New Scientist](#)) Globally, more than 20 per cent of carbon emissions to the atmosphere come from forest destruction.

Greenpeace is calling on all governments to increase efforts to stop illegal logging, to stop funding or approving projects that expand logging into large ancient forest areas, or that convert ancient forests to plantations. In particular, it is essential that the governments of Indonesia and Brazil prosecute companies that have been found to be logging or burning forests illegally, and that they recognise the rights of forest peoples to their customary lands.

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Reuters, Indonesian fires blamed on plantation firms, Jakarta, 10 August 1999

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