Amazon Forest (NASA)

The Coming Global Forest Regrowth

By Steve Goreham

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Last month, Pope Francis visited Peru and spoke about preserving the biodiversity of the Amazon rain forest. For decades, environmental groups have lamented the shrinking of world forests. But trends now point to a coming regrowth of global forests.

Deforestation has long been an important environmental issue. President Theodore Roosevelt voiced concern in 1907: "We are consuming our forests three times faster than they are being reproduced. Some of the richest timber lands of this continent have already been destroyed, and not replaced, and other vast areas are on the verge of destruction."

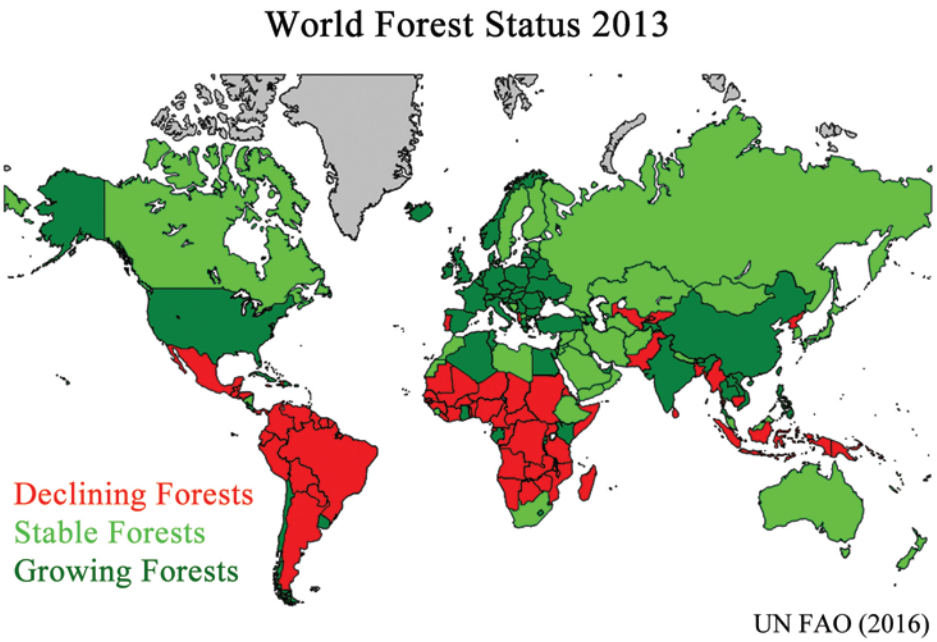
The felling of forests is blamed for habitat destruction, species extinction, and greenhouse gas emissions that reportedly cause dangerous global warming. Deforestation is labeled a crisis in Southeast Asia by the Rainforest Alliance, in Queensland, Australia by the World Wildlife Fund, and in Sudan by the United Nations, a few of many such characterizations.

Throughout history, people felled forests to clear land for farms and to gather wood for fuel. An estimated 60 percent of Europe's forests were cut down during the last 2,000 years. About 30 percent of US forests disappeared, with most vanishing during the 1800s. Earth has lost an estimated 30 percent of original forests since agriculture began.

Today, world forested areas are still shrinking, but at a decreasing rate. The UN reports

that from 1990 to 2015, global forested area declined by about three percent, but that the net rate of forest loss decreased by about 50 percent from previous decades. Developing nations in Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia continue to lose forests, but forests are stable or growing in North America, Europe, and most of Asia.

Today, forested area is declining in about one-third of the world's countries, stable in one-third, and growing in one third. Forests are stable or growing in more than 100 nations, including Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, the US, and in most of Europe.



Forests in the United States have been growing for about 50 years. Today, more than 90 percent of US paper comes from high-yield forests planted specifically to be harvested. Company promotional campaigns to "go electronic and save a tree" have little factual basis, at least in the US.

As the income of nations rises, deforestation changes to forest regrowth. Modern high-yield agriculture techniques reduce the need for additional farmland. Modern fuels, such as propane and natural gas replace wood for heating and cooking. The great promise of forest regrowth can be achieved by boosting the income of nations and the adoption of high-yield farming techniques, not by coercive sustainable policies to restrict forestry or agriculture.

Paradoxically, policies to "fight climate change" are causing deforestation. Biofuel programs pursued by Europe and the United States during the last two decades caused an additional 41 million hectares of land to be used for ethanol and biodiesel production, an area the size of Germany. Rain forests in Indonesia have been cut down and replaced with palm oil plantations, so that feedstock for biodiesel can be shipped 10,000

miles to Germany to meet biofuel targets.

At the same time, evidence shows that rising atmospheric carbon dioxide, partly driven by industrial emissions, is boosting forest growth. Satellite data shows an eleven percent growth in global leaf area from 1982 to 2010. Scientists attribute most of this growth to rising atmospheric carbon dioxide.

Despite all the concern about deforestation, the great news is that world forests will be growing on net within the next few decades.

Steve Goreham is a speaker on the environment, business, and public policy and author of the book *Outside the Green Box: Rethinking Sustainable Development.*