

FAO FORESTRY

FAO responds to the tsunami

Immediately after South Asia was struck by a deadly tsunami on 26 December 2004, FAO moved into action to alleviate the suffering and restore the livelihoods of the affected populations. One aspect of the Organization's efforts has been assessment of the damage caused to mangroves and coastal forests. The extent of the damage is still not clear and it may take some time before the final impacts are known. In addition to the immediate damage to vegetation, the deposit of silt from the tsunami may clog the pores of aerial roots of mangroves, suffocating them. In the long term, changes in topography, soil salinity and upstream freshwater inflow may also adversely affect the mangroves and other coastal forests.

Mangroves and coastal forests contribute directly to rural livelihoods by providing wood and non-wood forest products and indirectly by providing spawning grounds and nutrient for fish and shellfish. Damage caused by the tsunami will exert further pressure on existing coastal forests, including mangroves, due to a high demand for fuelwood and wood to rebuild houses, fishing boats and infrastructure. Rehabilitation of severely affected coastal forests could thus assist the recovery process from the tsunami.

FAO is also gathering information on how and to what extent mangroves helped mitigate the effects of the tsunami.

FAO, however, cautions against large-scale planting of mangroves that may disturb other ecosystems such as turtle nesting grounds and sea-grass beds. FAO recommends that rehabilitation be undertaken within a framework of integrated coastal area management that takes into account appropriate development of fisheries and aquaculture, agriculture, roads and other infrastructure, industry, tourism and residential living areas. FAO has established an interdepartmental task force and is in direct contact with government officials in the affected countries, experts from other agencies, development banks and civil society organizations to ensure a coordinated approach to the relief and reconstruction efforts.

FAO is working with several other organizations to gather information on the impacts of the tsunami on mangroves and other coastal forests and to provide advice to countries in their rehabilitation efforts. FAO's assistance to affected countries will be an agenda item at the Ministerial Meeting on Forests and at the seventeenth session of the Committee on Forestry (COFO) to be held in March 2005 in Rome.