



Shaping the global agenda for forests and climate change

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Experts: New wave of deforestation threatens Africa's climate resilience

DURBAN (4 December 2011)—A new wave of deforestation is sweeping across Africa decimating wildlife and threatening the resilience of its ecosystems to withstand the effects of climate change—especially in the area of food security, experts said.

“Deforestation rates in Africa... are accelerating,” said Helen Gichohi, President of the [African Wildlife Foundation](#) during a keynote speech at [Forest Day 5](#) in Durban on the sidelines of COP17. “The disappearing forests, the overgrazed rangelands, and conversion to crop agriculture of grasslands and wetlands that had served as a refuge to drought have all diminished the resilience of ecosystems.”

She called for REDD+ funding to move more quickly to save the continent's forest. REDD+ stands for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. It is a mechanism being discussed as part of the U.N. climate talks in Durban, which could see billions of dollars channeled to developing countries to protect their forests.

Gichohi's message was echoed by fellow keynote speaker, Bob Scholes of the [Council for Scientific and Industrial Research](#) (CSIR) in South Africa, who said, “The next major wave of deforestation is already here and it is happening in Africa.

“If we can do something to influence deforestation we can have a greater effect on everything than has happened so far under the Kyoto Protocol,” he said. “This challenge is worth the effort.”

Scholes described the typical pattern for deforestation in Africa: loggers come into a forest, they chop the large trees and take out the valuable timber, then charcoal manufacturers remove a large proportion of the remaining trees, and then low-input, low-output agriculture arrives, which after a few cycles leaves the land degraded and of little value to anyone.

“It is urgent to safeguard Africa's forests, not only because they slow climate change but also because they act as a final barrier to creeping desertification,

underpin sustainable agricultural production, and support the livelihoods of tens of millions of rural poor,” said Frances Seymour, the Director General of the [Center for International Forestry Research](#) (CIFOR).

In her opening address, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, South Africa’s Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, said, “Climate change threatens to undermine many of the development objectives of countries in Africa and in the rest of the developing world, in particular in the areas of water, energy, health, agriculture and forestry.”

Scientists have warned that sub-Saharan Africa may be among the hardest hit regions by climate change. The continent has already been struck by a string of climate-related disasters, most recently the drought-induced famine in the Greater Horn of Africa. Experts [say](#) forest destruction and other forms of human-caused land degradation have transformed vast areas of once grazeable and farmable land into barren landscapes.

Gichohi said that 9 percent of forest cover has been lost between 1995 and 2005 across sub-Saharan Africa, representing an average loss of 40,000 square kilometres of forest per year. For example, Kenya has lost the majority of its forest cover to settlements and agriculture, leaving only 1.7 percent of its land still forested.

“Forests cannot be sustained if people are hungry or governance of natural resources is inadequate,” said Rachel Kyte, Vice President of Sustainable Development at the World Bank. “Hunger places a direct burden on forests when people are forced to push deeper into forested areas to grow crops... or resort to making and selling charcoal in order to buy food.”

With declining conditions in forests looming as a threat to climate health and the wellbeing of a billion impoverished people, the world’s largest consortium of agricultural researchers announced at Forest Day the launch of an ambitious global research program devoted to forests and agroforestry. The program will have an initial three-year budget of US\$233 million. The [CGIAR research program on Forests, Trees, and Agroforestry](#) aims to reinvigorate efforts to reduce deforestation and forest degradation and expand the use of trees on farms.

The initiative includes a focus on the critical importance of forests as natural “carbon sinks” that can help slow the pace of climate change and the need to conserve forest biodiversity. CGIAR experts believe that improved management of forests and trees can play a wider role in reducing risks for smallholder farmers and improving the well-being of forest-dependent communities, particularly women and other disadvantaged groups.

Current state of REDD+ and forests at COP17

The current state of climate negotiations, in particular around REDD+ and its implementation and the drivers of deforestation, were a major focus of discussions at the event. Although agriculture is acknowledged as a driver of deforestation in the current REDD+ draft text under discussion by the UNFCCC,

more should be done to integrate agricultural and forest mitigation through a joint “landscape approach.”

Channeling the legacy of the late Wangari Maathai, Africa’s first female Nobel Peace Laureate and a champion for the environment, conveners screened [a video](#) challenging the global forest community to act boldly to diminish the threat of climate change.

“It is the people who must save the environment. It is the people who must make the leaders change. So we must stand up for what we believe in and we cannot be intimidated,” Maathai was quoted as saying in the film.

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Forest Day is convened by the Center for International Forestry Research on behalf of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests. The year’s event is hosted jointly with the Government of South Africa, through the Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries. It attracted more than 1,000 people, including more than 200 climate change negotiators. *For more information, visit www.ForestDay.org*

The **Collaborative Partnership on Forests** (CPF) is a voluntary arrangement among 14 international organisations and secretariats with substantial programmes on forests (CIFOR, FAO, ITTO, IUFRO, CBD, GEF, UNCCD, UNFF, UNFCCC, UNDP, UNEP, ICRAF, WB and IUCN). The CPF’s mission is to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forest and strengthen long-term political commitment to this end.

The **Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries** strives towards a leading, dynamic, prosperous and people-centered sector. Their values are to deliver excellent service, establish a dedicated workforce and to focus on people and rural development. The Department as the custodian of South Africa’s forests aims to ensure sustainable management of these resources to realise their social, environmental and economic benefits.

The **Center for International Forestry Research** (CIFOR) advances human wellbeing, environmental conservation and equity by conducting research to inform policies and practices that affect forests in developing countries. CIFOR helps ensure that decision-making that affects forests is based on solid science and principles of good governance, and reflects the perspectives of developing countries and forest-dependent people. CIFOR is one of 15 centres within the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.