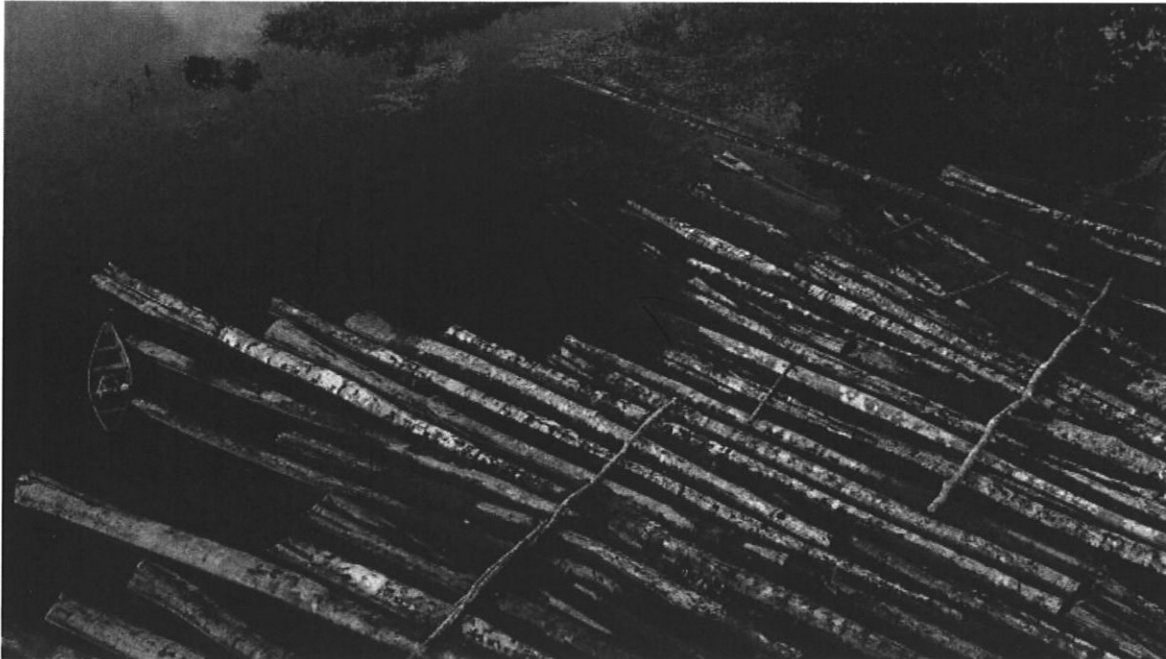


**Deforestation****Global deforestation accelerates during pandemic**

Tree cover losses increase 77% as collapse in economies pushes exploitation of resources



Logs of wood seized by the Amazon Military Police on the Manacapuru River in Brazil's Amazon © Ricardo Oliveira/AFP/Getty

**Anna Gross** in London, **Andres Schipani** in Manaus, **Stefania Palma** in Singapore and **Stephanie Findlay** in New Delhi AUGUST 9 2020

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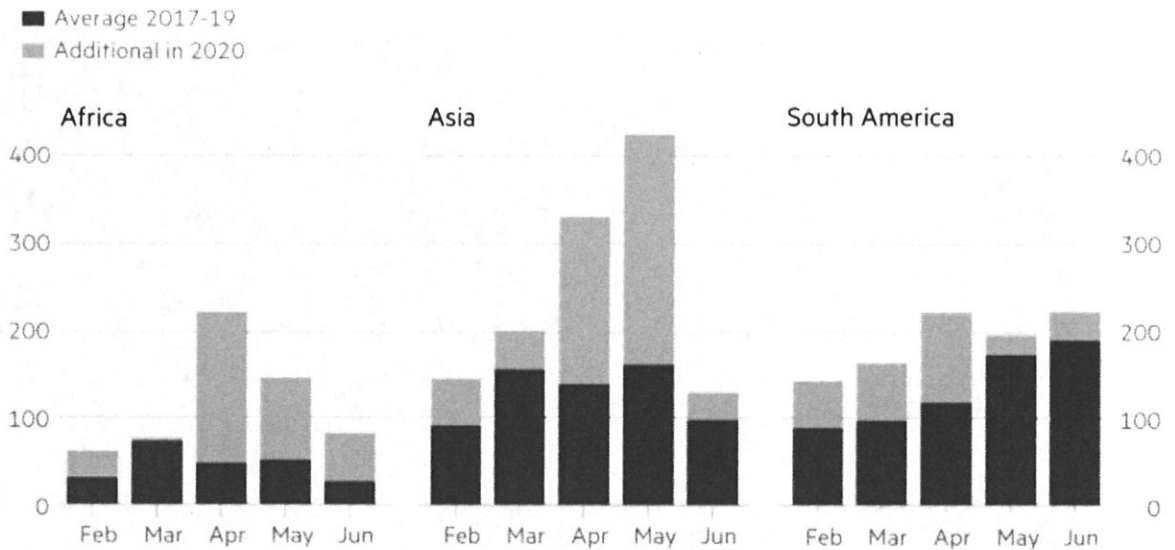
Forests have been razed at an alarming rate across Asia, Africa and Latin America during the coronavirus pandemic, according to new research, as environmental law enforcement has been sidelined and villagers have turned to logging for income in parts of the tropical world.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, forest loss alerts have increased by 77 per cent compared to the average from 2017-2019, according to data from Global Land Analysis and Discovery (GLAD) — a worldwide warning system for the depletion of tree cover — and compiled by conservation body WWF Germany.

GLAD's alerts are based on satellite detection of tree cover loss. While they cannot definitively be attributed to deforestation or logging, they are the best global indicator of land change over time.

## Data suggest deforestation has increased more than 50% during the pandemic

Areas of 'forest disturbance alerts', which suggest deforestation (hectares '000)



Sources: Global Landscape Analyses and Discovery;  
WWF Germany  
© FT

The data suggests a sharp increase in deforestation in Africa and Asia in the first six months of the year, particularly in April and May. Data collected by a government agency in Brazil for its benchmark annual period going from the beginning of August 2019 to the end of July 2020, also shows an almost 35 per cent rise in forest clearing.

“In some parts of the world there has been a collapse in the local economy and people are turning to the land around them to find what they need to survive,” said Mike Barrett, executive director of science and conservation at WWF-UK.

“And, far more sinister than that are those parts of the world where we're seeing deliberate attempts to use the cover of the pandemic to deforest.”

Deforestation, which releases large stores of carbon into the air and warms the atmosphere, has made its way into mainstream politics over the past year, with both the UK and the EU considering rules to outlaw the importing of products from illegally cleared land.

The topic has taken on a new urgency as a growing body of scientific evidence has linked deforestation and land-use change to outbreaks of infectious disease.

“All pathways that take us to a world where we've avoided dangerous climate change will require more forests and not less,” warned Mr Barrett.

During lockdowns, rural populations in Africa have had difficulty getting to their jobs and schools, according to Jan Boerner, a professor of sustainable land use at Bonn University in Germany. Many have turned to tree-clearing for crop production and the sale of wood.



The impact of illegal mining in Tumaco, Narino department, Colombia © Raul Arboleda/AFP/Getty

The same is true in Nepal, where a review of data from 11 protected areas conducted by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and WWF Nepal, found that cases of illegal extraction of forest resources had risen 227 per cent in the first month of lockdown compared to the previous month. More environmental crimes were logged during that period than in the preceding 11 months combined.

Nabin Gopal Baidya, project manager at Wildlife Conservation Nepal, a non-profit based in Kathmandu, says that the coronavirus pandemic has limited mobility, making law enforcement difficult while out-of-work labourers in villages are turning to illegal logging.

Deforestation in commodity supply chains — such as palm, soy, and beef — is a “different beast” that predates the pandemic but has been exacerbated by it, according to Prof Boerner.

Brazil’s Amazon rainforests have been a global centre for these activities. Between August 2019 and July 2020, according to official data released on Friday, an area the size of Cyprus was cleared by loggers, miners, and ranchers.

Environmental advocates and scientific researchers blame the policies of President Jair Bolsonaro for emboldening illegal loggers, land grabbers and wildcat miners in clearing forest.



Brazilian environment minister Ricardo Salles in his office in Brasília © Evaristo Sa/AFP/Getty

Brazil's environment minister, Ricardo Salles, claimed this week that the government was making "every effort" to reach zero illegal deforestation by 2030. But in a letter last month, Ibama, Brazil's environmental enforcement agency, complained its capacity had been reduced by the government.

In palm-producing Indonesia, where fire season is beginning, cleared forest land jumped 50 per cent in the first 20 weeks of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, according to GLAD data and Greenpeace analysis.

### Latest coronavirus news



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"We are worried about how the government is doing fire prevention during the pandemic," said Kiki Taufik, head of Greenpeace's Indonesian forests campaign.

Meteorologists forecast Indonesia's 2020 dry season to be wetter than last year, which could help mitigate fires. But analysts fear significant budget cuts to authorities charged with preventing and monitoring fires amid economic fallout from Covid-19 might exacerbate the problem. "Covid does reduce environmental enforcement capacity," said Philip Fearnside, a researcher at the National Institute for Research in Amazonia at Manaus.

The key question is what will happen to forests when the worst of the pandemic is over. Sven Wunder, senior associate at the European Forest Institute in Barcelona, believes that if a global economic crisis sets in, demand for commodities associated with deforestation will fall.

"Studying what has happened in previous global recessions, you can see there should be less deforestation going forward," he said.

But others fear that desperation to recover from the economic setbacks may cause companies to abandon existing deforestation pledges. Last month, Sime Darby, the Malaysian palm oil company, withdrew from its carbon agreement, citing budgetary constraints caused by Covid-19.

Experts believe legal protections are the best tool governments have to protect forests. "The one thing we can do is legislate to get deforestation out of supply chains," said Mr Barrett.

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