



Forest Conversion

During the last twenty years of the twentieth century, 300 million hectares of tropical forests were converted to non-forest land-uses worldwide. The conversion of forests to other land uses imposes severe environmental and social costs due to the ecological impacts of clearance, uncontrolled burning, and disregard for the rights and interests of local or indigenous communities. Without significant changes in policy and practice, the process of forest conversion is likely to continue at a rapid rate and pose a major threat to High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF – see separate position paper), freshwater ecosystems, livelihoods of forest dependant peoples and habitats of endangered species such as elephants, rhinos, tigers and great apes. Reduction of wildlife habitat leads to increased human-wildlife interaction and conflict.

WWF defines forest conversion as a continuous process of forest degradation, leading from natural forests over one or several steps to the replacement of forests by other forms of land use, such as plantations, agriculture, pasture, mining and urbanization. The driving forces behind forest conversion vary and are often interrelated. Among the most important are: the fact that forests are not valued for the long-term benefits that they provide, and that conversion often costs very little money. This creates incentives to log and sell the valuable timber out of forests and then convert the degraded forest land to more profitable land uses rather than to undertake sustainable forest management. Non-existent or insufficient landscape planning procedures and lack of guarantee of land ownerships and tenure rights often set the ground for uncontrolled and unwanted forest conversion processes.

WWF believes that forests are amongst the most diverse and valuable ecosystems around the globe. They provide a wide range of products and benefits for humans and nature that can rarely be substituted through other means. Therefore in general every effort should be made to prevent any forest, but especially HCV Forests from, being converted. WWF recognizes that under certain conditions planned and targeted conversion can be beneficial or necessary to reach specific goals of public interest without endangering the overall functionality of forests. Where conversion is planned the following conditions shall be fulfilled:

- Identified High Conservation Value Forests should not be affected by any forest conversion
- At a minimum, conversion must not contribute in any way to the extinction of species, or to the loss of significant subpopulations of an endangered species
- The total forest cover within a country or region should not be below an agreed long-term goal described in a National Forest Programme or planning documents developed through a multi-stakeholder process
- There should be proven and agreed public interest and benefits from the new land-use, that surpasses public interest in forest conservation
- There should be a transparent planning process on a landscape level, involving all relevant stakeholders
- Independent environmental and social impact assessments should be conducted and the necessary measures to prevent negative impacts of the conversion implemented

WWF will work together with governments, public and private institutions and other partners towards the elimination of unplanned and damaging forms of conversion to safeguard biodiversity and social values by:

- Calling for transparent planning processes to achieve an optimal distribution of natural forests, plantations, agricultural areas, urban areas and other land-uses in a given landscape. This includes well-informed negotiations among a wide range of stakeholders to balance ecological, social and economic dimensions of natural resource use across the landscape
- Enforcing adequate safeguards that recognize and guarantee the legal and customary rights of indigenous peoples and rural population to own, use and manage their lands, territories, and resources
- Engaging with financial institutions and market actors in forest conservation and lobbying for the elimination of policy incentives that contribute to forest conversion and forest destruction



Position Paper

February 2002

One of a series of position papers produced as WWF's response to the WWF/IUCN Forests for Life strategy and WWF's current five-year target-driven programme on forests
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