



WHAT ARE TERRESTRIAL ECOSYSTEMS?

“Terrestrial ecosystems” are those in which the flora and fauna develop on land, underground or in the sky. Their characteristics depend on various factors, such as temperature, humidity, altitude and latitude. This is why **there are a wide variety of terrestrial ecosystems, which range from deserts** – with an arid climate, a lack of water and fauna that has adapted to the environment by developing survival techniques – **to forests, savannahs, moorlands, tundras, etc.**

In every terrestrial ecosystem we find different wildlife: from cacti in the deserts, to large trees which are home to a huge amount of life; from

lions in the Savannah to the countless insects in the tropical jungle.

Forests have the greatest biodiversity of all terrestrial ecosystems, they cover around 30% of the surface of the Earth, and the livelihoods of around 1.6 billion people depend upon them.

Moreover, they perform a huge range of functions – such as regulating climate; storing carbon; removing air pollutants; reducing the risk of flooding; assisting in food, energy and water security; and improving the physical and mental health of citizens.¹

¹ *Forests and Sustainable Cities*. Unasylva 250: International journal of forestry and forest industry, Vol. 69 2018/1, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).



However, **deforestation and desertification caused by human activities and climate change pose massive challenges for sustainable development and have affected the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, hindering the fight against poverty.**²

THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS: KEY TO FOREST MANAGEMENT

The United Nations aims to promote the management, preservation and sustainable development of all kinds of forests. Within the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), **the UN Forum on Forests is the intergovernmental body responsible for promoting, overseeing and assessing the implementation of States of sustainable forestry management schemes.**³ To do this, it is supported by a series of international documents that establish a series of policies, measures and commitments required to strengthen judicial and political frameworks linked to forests in each State. The first global consensus about forests was the **Forest Principles Declaration**, approved in August 1992. This declaration recognised that **“the subject of forests is related to the entire range of environmental and development issues and opportunities, including the right to socio-**

economic development on a sustainable basis.”⁴ Various principles indicate **the need to protect the rights of indigenous populations, who are fundamentally those that live in the forests, as well as the right of women to fully participate in forest management.**

Chapter 11 of Agenda 21 - a document created in the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 - is dedicated to combatting deforestation⁵. It recognises the importance of guaranteeing the right of indigenous populations to participate in public forest preservation policies to ensure a rational approach to sustainable development.

More recently (2007), the United Nations Forum on Forests approved the **Forest Instrument** (later approved by the General Assembly), which articulated a series of measures to strengthen forest governance and to establish a funding framework for all forests.⁶

It is true that these documents are non-legally binding, meaning that States are not legally required to adhere to them. **In the event that international forestry commitments are not applied, the environmental impacts that may be generated directly affect people’s human rights. This has been sanctioned on various occasions through national case law and by international judicial bodies.** For example, “in 1994 the Supreme

² *Life on land: Why it matters*. United Nations.

³ More information on [United Nations Forum on Forests](#)

⁴ [Doc. A/CONF.151/26 \(Vol. III\)](#)

⁵ [Agenda 21, Earth Summit, UN, 1992](#)

⁶ [Doc. A/RES/62/98](#)



Court of the Philippines ruled that the right to a balanced and healthy environment and the right to health, entitled a group of Filipino children to stand in court on behalf of future generations to seek the cancellation of forest logging permits. On an international level, the UN Human Rights Committee has established⁷ that the expropriation of land for timber development may threaten the way of life and culture of indigenous peoples.”⁸

The different key players in forest management must fulfil the internationally agreed commitments regarding forests and terrestrial ecosystems, such as **12 targets of Sustainable Development Goal 15, which between now and 2030 aim to sustainably manage forests and combat deforestation.**

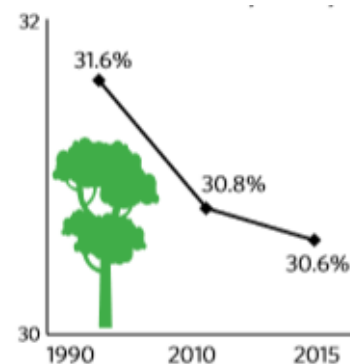


HARMFUL HUMAN PRACTICES

Deforestation - a process caused by human activities, which leads to the disappearance of the Earth's forests - is one of the main threats to the environment (target 15.2). **The proportion of land area covered by forests fell from 31.6% in 1990 to 30.8% in 2010.** The “good news” is that

from 2010 to 2015, the annual net loss of forest area globally was less than half that of the previous period, reaching 30.6% in 2015.

Graph I. Land covered by forests. Source: SDG Report 2017, UNDP



Furthermore, illegal poaching and trafficking of wildlife continues to thwart conservation efforts (target 15.1): 120 countries are involved in the illegal trade of nearly 7,000 animal and plant species. **In 2013, elephant ivory, rosewood, rhinoceros horns and reptiles comprised 70% of total wildlife seizures.**⁹ Targets 15.7 and 15.c highlight the urgency of ending these practices, and target 15.6¹⁰ mentions the protection of threatened species.

⁷ Lubicon Lake Band vs. Canada, Communication no. 167/1984

⁸ SAVARESI HARTMANN, Annalisa. *Human Rights and Forest Conservation: What does the law say?* Gazette from the UICN Forest Preservation Programme, n°36, 2008

⁹ Sustainable Development Goals Report (SDG) 2017, UNPD

¹⁰ More information about the SDG 15 targets ([link](#))



WHO CAN DO WHAT?

ON AN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL



The **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**,

created in 1948, is the largest international environmental network, with over 1,300 members, including States, international agencies, NGOs, indigenous population organisations, scientific institutions, among others. Its main lines of work and research focus on protecting forests, ecosystems, biodiversity and animal species.

ON A NATIONAL LEVEL



Adopting international engagements to ensure that terrestrial ecosystems are protected is vital, yet these engagements are worthless unless each country mobilises and significantly increases the financial resources needed to conserve biodiversity and ecosystems (target 15.a) and for reforestation (target 15.b).

ON A LOCAL LEVEL



The **Association of Transhumance and Nature**, under the motto “Shepherds without Frontiers”, works to preserve and promote the transhumance of shepherds that migrate their flocks to valleys across Spain. Find out about their work in the **FABRE Testimony - SDG15**.

AND WHAT CAN YOU DO?



“Forests precede civilisations and deserts follow them.” F.R de Chateaubriand

Infant and Primary pupils

What do your pupils know about the nature around them? There will surely be trees and plants, parks or gardens nearby. Take them outside and go on a “Lost Tree Hunt”. To do this, find a leaf from each tree or plant where you are going to play the game. Next, make groups and give each group some of these leaves. They have to find the tree or plant it belongs to. Ask them why these trees and plants are so important. They can see why on [this video](#). Older pupils can discover Paco’s story on [this video](#), a Mexican boy who finds out about what deforestation is. Where is Mexico? Is our town/village facing the same problem? Next, ask pupils to question their families about what has changed in the landscape over the years. Did there used to be more trees? With their families, pupils could draw a before and after picture and share it in class the next day.

Secondary and Baccalaureate Students

Indigenous populations are the hardest-hit demographic by the destruction of terrestrial ecosystems. The Thai Government is facing a dilemma: protecting the traditional way of life of indigenous populations whilst preserving forests with the so-called “protected areas”. The indigenous women there have united to preserve their culture. Discover more about this issue on [this video](#). In Peru and Honduras, some indigenous populations taking action to defend their forests are facing threats and human rights violations. Discover their reality with [this video](#). You could also watch [this video](#) to find about the situation in Argentina. End the session with a debate: Who is responsible for this issue?

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