

# The Manila Times<sup>®</sup>

[Op-Ed Columns](#)[Opinion on Page One](#)

## **Saving the forests is saving the planet**



By [Fr. Shay Cullen, SSC](#)  
March 21, 2021

Today, March 21, is the International Day of Forests. Forests are of vital importance to the well-being of all creatures, the natural world and especially humankind. They absorb most of the damaging carbon dioxide that causes climate change. Their protection and restoration should be of highest national priority for each nation to hold back global warming from rising above 1.5 degrees Celsius and avert the catastrophe that is to come.

Forests are vital for retaining and releasing water the whole year-round, preventing droughts and providing clean water and protection from landslides and soil erosion in the typhoon season. In the Philippines and other countries that have suffered deforestation, there is severe low crop yield that causes

food insecurity because of massive rains and typhoons that result in soil erosion. In some provinces, 50 percent of the rich topsoil has been washed away and more to come. There are no more forests to hold the water back. The Philippines, once self-sufficient in rice, now imports most of its rice.

The deforestation is mainly caused by mining companies and loggers allowed by officials. In 1900, there was 70 percent forest cover in the Philippines. By 1999, there were about 3 percent to 5 percent remaining. Forty years of savage uncontrolled logging caused this irreplaceable loss of primary rainforest. Denuded, bare and exposed hills and mountains are the tragic results and the destruction still goes on. Ninety-eight percent of Philippine plywood exported to Japan is worth \$86 million. Some wood exported are from sustainable plantations, however.

There has been what I call “foresticide” with the global deforestation rate at an estimated 10 million hectares per year. That is 429 million hectares since 1990. The cutting of millions of hectares of Brazilian Amazon rainforests and the killing of forest guards and indigenous people are growing. More than 230 million hectares of prime forests will have been destroyed by 2050, researchers say.

There is a “secret war” over the environment in the Philippines, Brazil and elsewhere as some government officials support logging and mining companies.

Dozens of forest guards and environmental protectors are being systematically shot dead by mining security guards in the Philippines and cattle ranchers in Brazil. The military has allegedly declared indigenous communities as terrorists or supporters of communists and justify displacing them. The mining companies then exploit the ancestral lands without protest or opposition. Italian environmentalist priest Father “Pops” Tentorio was shot dead in 2011. No one has been convicted for the crime. Other priests were killed in previous years.

In the Amazon, the forests are cut to provide pasture for cattle and fields for palm oil and soya-growing. The indigenous people are being wiped out by disease and violence by the cattle ranchers and soya planters. The proliferation of cattle in the world is now at 989 million, which is down from more than one billion in 2014, causing an environmental disaster as the animals produce huge amounts of methane, a global-warming gas causing climate change that damages forests. In Europe, there is a battle to preserve the forests of Poland. The government is allowing the logging of the world heritage site of the famous primeval Bialowieza Forest that has stood for

millions of years. In 2018, the European Court of Justice declared the deforestation as illegal.

But Poland is planning to continue soon despite the protests and legal challenges. Destroying the habitat of wildlife will destroy their chances for survival.

Germany has a big threat to its fabled forests by acid rain caused by polluting factories, coal plants and vehicles emissions. By the 1980s, 2.5 million hectares were damaged and hundreds of thousands of trees died. The acid rain killed the leaves and the roots. The forests are being protected with changes in law and change to renewable-energy sources.

Trees are essential for humans and animals and birds. They emit healthy fumes and aromas and that is why it is healthy to live near trees. Trees are inter-connected by a root system and promote the growth of essential fungi and other plants. A world without trees and wild creatures is a diminished form of life. But there is good news as mega planting projects are getting popular, according to this report by Geographyrealm

<https://www.geographyrealm.com/mega-tree-planting-efforts-around-the-world/>):

“In India in Uttar Pradesh, 800,000 volunteers planted 50 million trees in a single day. The record was broken the following year by the state of Madhya Pradesh, which had 1.5 million volunteers planting 66 million tree saplings in just 12 hours. The efforts continue each year. This year, respecting all the social distancing measures, 2 million volunteers gathered at farmlands, government buildings and riverbanks in Uttar Pradesh to plant 250 million saplings distributed by officials. Also, this year, trees are being tagged to keep records of their survival. The overall goal is to increase the forest cover to 235 million acres by 2030 — a number India pledged in Paris in 2016.

“The Ethiopian government’s Green Legacy Initiative placed volunteers — around 23 million of them — at 1,000 planting sites across the country. Together they reportedly managed to plant more than 350 million saplings in just 12 hours.

“Faced with desertification and increasing wildfire threats, Turkey has initiated its own mega-planting project. Last year, the government declared that November 11 would become the National Forestation Day. In the first year, volunteers planted 11 million trees in more than 2,000 locations across Turkey. The northern Anatolian city of Çorum broke the world record for the most trees planted at a single site in one hour — 303,150 saplings.”

Not that many survived, however, and the survival rate is disputed, with an estimated 40 percent perhaps having made it.

Yet it is hoped in the future that the forests can be replanted, and in the Philippines, we need more planting projects working directly with the people. Tree projects of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources have endured failures and allegedly some corrupt deals with contract growers.

The best practice we found is to give the saplings to the indigenous peoples to plant on their ancestral deforested lands. In our efforts at the Preda Foundation working with the Aeta indigenous people, they plant an average of 3,000 saplings every year for the past 15 years. A small but significant contribution. We can save the forests and restore them by trusting and working with the people.

<https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/03/21/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/saving-the-forests-is-saving-the-planet/853849/>