Deforestation in Australia

Humans cut down trees, remove vegetation and drain wetlands to make way for farms and cities. More than one-fifth of Australia’s forests and woodlands have been cleared since Europeans arrived. Most cleared land in Australia is used for cattle and sheep grazing or growing wheat.

Deforestation front

In 2018, the WWF released the Living Planet Report, which found that Australia is one of the world’s deforestation hotspots, the only developed nation to make the list. The report went as far to compare the east coast of Australia to the situation in the Amazon – highlighting it as a ‘deforestation front’.

Another report by researchers from the University of Queensland demonstrated that just 20 countries contain 94 per cent of the world’s remaining wilderness, and that more than 70 per cent is in just five countries, including Australia – giving us more responsibility to protect what’s left of the country’s wild places.

In the latter report, the researchers suggested that using Indigenous knowledge about land management was critical to ensuring the environment was well looked after. “The recognition of local community rights to land ownership and management could be a key way to limit the impacts of industrial activity,” one of the causes of deforestation, the report reads.

Deforestation fronts

△ Hotspots of projected forest loss between 2010 and 2030

Key:
- Green: Forest
- Red: Deforestation fronts and projected deforestation, 2010-2030
Koala crisis

The number of koalas in New South Wales is plummeting because of land clearing, as well as road collision and dog attacks. Once abundant along the east coast of Australia, koalas now live in small, fragmented populations.

Oisin Sweeney, the senior ecologist at the National Parks Association of NSW (NPA) says that koala populations in NSW are under 200,000, a tiny fraction of what they once were. “Almost every koala population in NSW is believed to be in decline and, on the north coast, koala numbers are estimated to have fallen by 50 per cent in just the last 20 years,” he tells Australian Geographic.

According to the NPA, the Regional Forestry Agreement (RFA) – which says that proposals to log in public forests don’t require the usual approvals under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act – has devastated koala habitats over the past two decades. Enough so, that in 2016, 30 environmental groups demanded the agreement not be renewed after it was set to expire in 2017, arguing its renewal “would constitute an irrational decision on environmental, economic and social grounds”.

The renewal of the RFA in NSW was one aspect of a set of new controversial biodiversity laws introduced by the government in 2016, which included a relaxation of land-clearing laws on private land, which green groups argue will result in the destruction of key habitats and an increase in carbon emissions.