

## Deforestation

Green plants remove carbon dioxide from the air and put oxygen back in. It was plant life that kept carbon dioxide levels balanced before humans began burning huge amounts of fossil fuels and wood.

Forests are, therefore, the lungs of the Earth. But our forests are being destroyed at an unprecedented rate. More than 27 million acres of tropical rain forests -- an area the size of Pennsylvania -- disappear every year. For the most part, they are burned, adding still more carbon dioxide to the air.

Deforestation has another consequence. The rain forest is home to millions of species of plants and animals, many as yet undiscovered. Many of these species may be extremely valuable to human welfare. Important new medicines have been derived from rain forest plants, including the most effective treatment for childhood leukemia. But these species are disappearing with their rain forest habitat.

Much of the cleared land is used for agriculture, in some cases for huge ranches exporting beef to richer countries, in other cases for subsistence farming by those driven to the countryside by urban poverty. But rain forest soil is low in nutrients, so the farmers and ranchers usually have to clear another stretch in a few years. Sometimes the land is logged, often to gain foreign exchange to repay the enormous foreign debts owed by many developing countries.

Saving the rain forests of the Amazon basin has become a major issue for the people of that region, often at great cost to their own safety. One example was Chico Mendes, the leader of a union of Brazilian rubber tappers who depend on the forest for their livelihoods. Mendes gained worldwide attention through his fight to stop the unrestricted clearing of rain forest land by wealthy ranchers. But in 1988 he was gunned down, joining thousands of workers, peasants and Indians who were murdered when they got in the way of the developers.

The problem of deforestation is not confined to the tropics. The old growth forests of North America are even more efficient recyclers of carbon dioxide. They too are being destroyed by massive logging.

The logging has become a difficult issue in the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia, Northern Ontario and Alaska. Lumber companies and their workers understandably want the right to continue to log. Environmentalists point out that, at current rates, the old-growth forests will only last another decade or so, and that the industry has lost far more jobs through productivity improvements than it will by restricting logging to younger trees, at a rate no faster than they can be replaced by new growth. In addition, environmentalists ask how we can expect developing countries to protect their ancient forests, when we will not protect our own.