

The global impact of EU forest policies

The European Union's Biodiversity and Forest Strategies for 2030 mandate protecting all remaining old-growth forests across the EU, increasing the area of habitat patches set aside within forests harvested for timber, and limiting clear-felling in timber-producing landscapes (1). Although saving old-growth forests is critical, standalone policies can produce unintended consequences (2). Without simultaneously reducing demand for forest products or increasing supply from plantations and secondary forests, such measures can lead to increased harvesting elsewhere, often in tropical countries, to accommodate demand. Shifting logging activities to countries with weaker legal protections aggravates biodiversity and carbon losses and exacerbates existing inequities in environmental burdens (3). Isolated policies displacing production will also undermine the EU's recent Deforestation Regulation to halt imports of deforestation-linked tropical products (4).

EU policies have global effects. In 2022, the share of tropical wood and furniture imports into EU27 countries reached a 15-year high of US\$4.4 billion (5). The risk that EU harvesting restrictions will further shift harvesting pressures to the tropics is considerable. By 2050, logging limits under the EU-Biodiversity Strategy could cut European roundwood production by 42%, increasing Brazilian and Malaysian non-coniferous-roundwood extraction by 19% and 8%, respectively (6). China's analogous ban on natural forest harvesting led to a 15% increase in solid-wood imports (7), driving extraction into carbon-dense, endemic-rich frontiers in the Congo Basin (8). Meanwhile, recent European trade sanctions on Russia and Belarus have eliminated US\$4.95 billion of timber imports to EU27 countries, driving a scramble for additional timber centered on the hyperdiverse tropics (5). Tropical harvests in old-growth forest cause disproportionate damage compared with temperate harvests as a result of higher diversity and sensitivity of tropical biota (9) and weaker governance in tropical harvesting regions (10).

To avoid worsening its global footprint, the EU must urgently integrate better mapping and conservation of old-growth forests (11) with additional policies. EU countries should improve timber product longevity and develop resilient, higher-yielding plantations on existing degraded lands alongside ecological approaches that restore native forest while generating timber (12). Better quantification of the socio-environmental consequences of homegrown and imported timber (3) and robust harvesting safeguards in all timber exporting nations are also needed. Crucially, EU countries must carefully consider the global consequences of domestic forestry changes and logging moratoria. Protecting

European forests is laudable, but trading conservation in Europe for far greater impacts in tropical rainforests is unacceptable.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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