

# Population movements and money remittances spur forest regrowth

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A study of forest cover in El Salvador in the September issue of *BioScience* presents novel findings on how economic globalization, land policy changes, and monies sent to family members by emigrants have transformed agriculture and stimulated forest regrowth. The study, by Susanna B. Hecht and Sassan S. Saatchi, employed socioeconomic data, land-use surveys, and satellite imagery to document substantial increases in the area of El Salvador covered by both light and heavy woodland since peace accords were signed in 1992.

Most analyses of forest cover in Central America have focused on loss of old-growth forests. In drawing attention to regrowth of woodland in a country that was extensively deforested during the 1970s, Hecht and Saatchi call for a renewed examination of social and economic influences on agricultural practices and their effects on forest extent. New growth forests, most often in a mosaic along with agriculture, can buffer declines in biological diversity and are extensively used by old growth species.

War drove many people to flee El Salvador during the 1980s and early 1990s, which led to many farms being abandoned. The country experienced a net increase in tree cover thereafter. Hecht and Saatchi found a 22 percent increase in the area with 30 percent tree cover, and a 6.5 percent increase in the area with more than 60 percent tree cover. Policies that encouraged sustainable agriculture contributed to the increase, the authors maintain.

Strikingly, they also found a strong link between forest resurgence and remittances of money from family members abroad, chiefly the United States. More than a sixth of El Salvador's population left during the fighting, which helps explain why remittances now exceed direct foreign investment more than eightfold. Apparently, households receiving funds from abroad felt less need to maintain existing fields and also cleared less land. Conservationists should be more cognizant of the power of remittances and agricultural policies to benefit forest regrowth, according to Hecht and Saatchi.

Source: American Institute of Biological Sciences

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