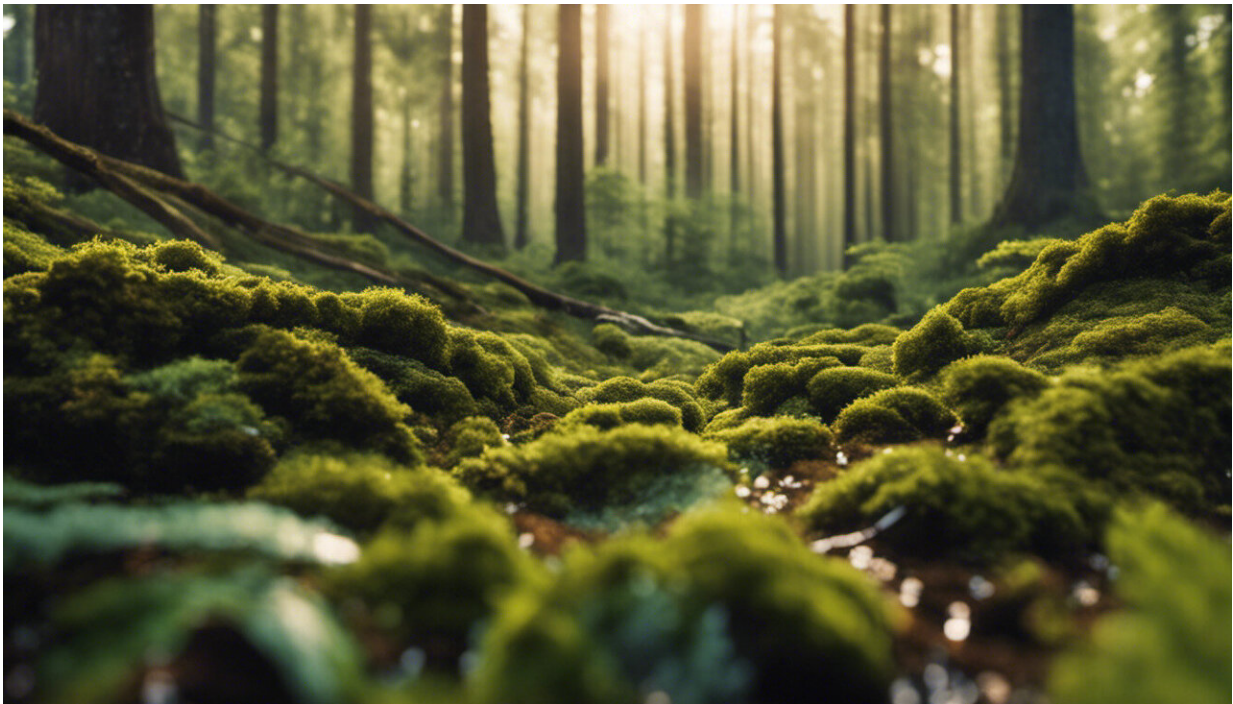


Forests are growing again where human well-being is increasing, finds new study

May 15 2018, by Jamie Carr



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Countries with high levels of human well-being are more likely to show increasing forest growth. That's the finding of a new study by a group of Finnish scientists, published in [PLOS ONE](#). Their work shows that countries exhibiting annual increases in the amount of trees typically score highly on the UN's [Human Development Index](#) (HDI), a scoring

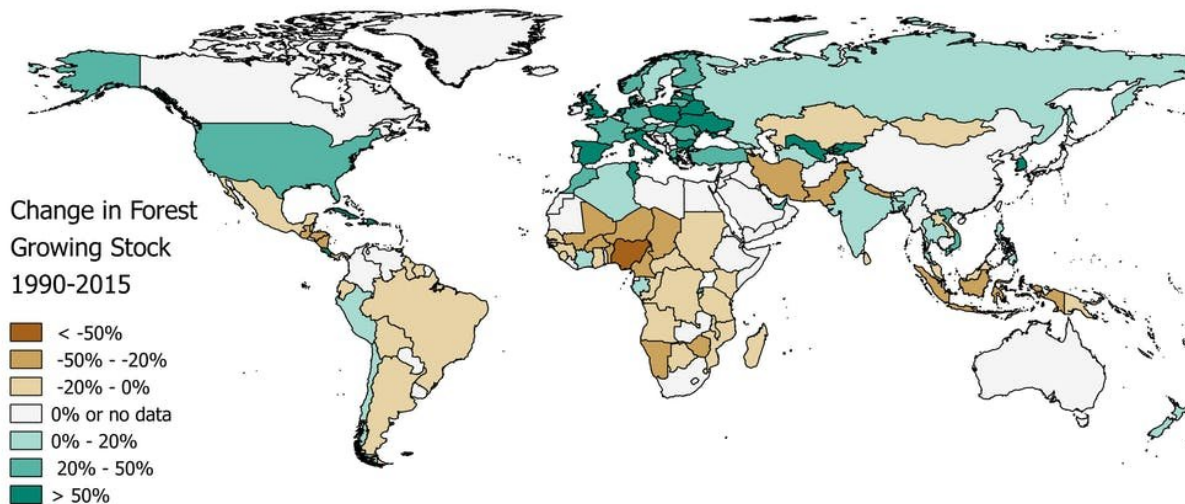
system that uses measures of life expectancy, education, and income to assess development status. Meanwhile, countries with a net annual forest loss typically score lower on the HDI.

The logical leap of faith here is to think that a remedy for the ongoing loss and degradation of much of the world's forests would be a massive push for [development](#) in deforested countries. But while such a noble undertaking would be desirable in many ways, these apparent environmental links warrant scrutiny.

At what cost?

The authors themselves discuss caveats to their findings, and these should not be ignored. For example, switching from net [forest](#) loss to net gain may simply involve sourcing things like wooden furniture or paper pulp from abroad, often from poorer nations with weaker environmental policies and safeguards. This process, known as "leakage", was perhaps best described and documented by the geographer [Patrick Meyfroidt and colleagues](#) in 2010. Among other examples, they illustrate leakage by looking at Vietnam, where national increases in forest cover were linked to sharp increases in imported wood, about half of which was illegal.

If such processes are occurring, then how far, and for how long, can the buck of exporting environmental impacts be passed?



Forests are generally growing back in more developed countries. Credit: Kauppi et al (2018)

In any case, those recovered forests often aren't all they seem. Under some definitions they can include [plantations](#) of oil palm or rubber – technically "forests", yet with few of the ecological benefits of the environment they replace. Even the supposedly naturally-recovered forests are rarely, if ever, as [biologically diverse and well-functioning](#) as their natural predecessors.

Things can be worsened by forest restoration schemes which may have human, rather than ecological, motives at heart. In Indonesia, for example, I have witnessed forest restoration work in national parks that favoured useful exotics over native forest species. In Tanzania, local NGOs such the as the [Tanzania Forest Conservation Group](#) lobby for policies that promote forest conservation over (and in addition to) tree planting, citing both ecological and well-being benefits.

The clear message here is that it is far preferable to prevent damage in the first place, than to try and restore former conditions at a later point.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Forests and development

Modern concepts of [sustainable development](#) are typified by the UN's 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), which cover a variety of topics, including matters of well-being, infrastructure and environment. Studies of how these goals interact (whether for better or worse) are important if we are to achieve truly sustainable development.

The latest forest cover study uses a composite index to investigate forest trends, which may disguise a more complex picture. Past work has

shown that [improved education](#) (SDG 4) is commonly associated with reducing deforestation, while the effect of increasing GDP (SDG 8) on forests is [far more complicated](#). The authors use a metric that combines these components (along with [life expectancy](#)), which does not explain how they interact.

Further complexities involve other areas of development, which have their own effects. For example, in countries with high levels of inequality (SDG 10), [development can exacerbate deforestation rates](#), rather than remedy them. In Brazil, for example, national efforts to raise people's development status proved more damaging to forests in municipalities with [high levels of land inequality](#) than in those where land was more fairly shared.



The UN's Sustainable Development Goals apply to all countries and were adopted in 2015. Credit: UN

Some work suggests that improvements in [gender equality](#) (SDG 5) could have positive outcomes for forests, while forest-degrading activities witnessed [during times of conflict](#) suggest that peaceful relations (SDG 16) are also conducive to healthy forests.

On the flipside, achieving [global food security](#) (SDG 2), [meeting energy needs](#) (SDG 7), and developing [sustainable infrastructure](#) (SDG 11) will all require careful planning and monitoring to ensure that their environmental impacts are minimised.

Ultimately, this paper gives reasons to feel positive about the inevitable development of humans and the fate of the world's forests. It implies that, at a certain level of development, forests lost or degraded in the processes of developing will begin to regenerate or repair (whether naturally or with human assistance). I sincerely hope that the Finnish team's work encourages nations across the world, developed or otherwise, to restore as much forest as they can.

Nevertheless, in an age of rapid climate change, biodiversity loss, and human population growth, we [need our remaining forests](#) more than ever. The world must find sustainable ways to develop that do not involve destroying what forests are left.

Following in the footsteps of already developed nations, and simply replacing forests at a later point, should not be considered a viable course of action.

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