

Gabon summit promotes worth of tropical rainforests

February 28 2023



An acacia sapling in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A two-day conference to highlight the key environmental role and value of the world's rainforests got underway in Gabon Wednesday, backed by several leaders of tropical countries.

"Forests potentially represent 20-30 percent of the solution to climate change," Gabon's minister of waters and forests, British-born Lee White, said in opening remarks.

Long recognised as a haven of biodiversity, tropical forests are increasingly acknowledged also as a buffer against climate change.

Vegetation absorbs carbon dioxide under the natural process of photosynthesis, making forests a shield against climate-altering carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions.

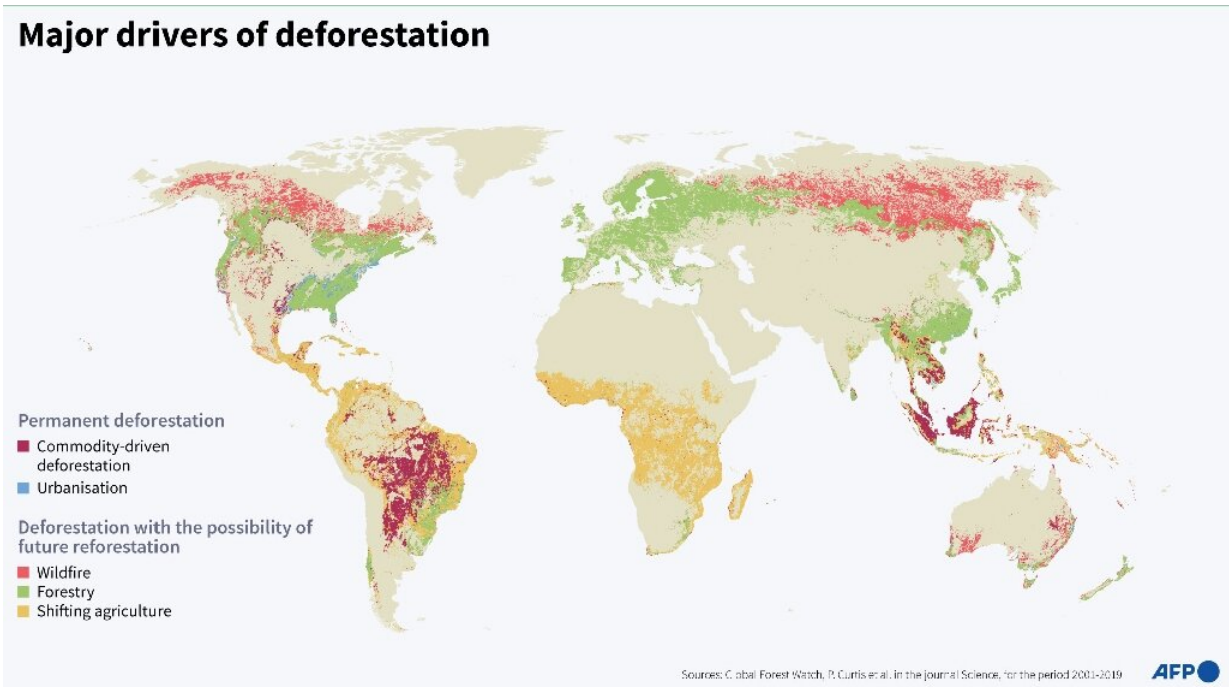
But they are also at threat, especially from loggers.

Between 2015 and 2020, around 10 million hectares (25 million acres) of forests were destroyed annually, according to United Nations figures.

The so-called One Forest Summit is a brainchild of Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba and France's President Emmanuel Macron, who announced it at last year's UN climate COP in Egypt.

The conference will give a push to advancing scientific knowledge about the ecological value of rainforest and fostering "sustainable value chains" in forestry.

Another priority will be how to both monetise and preserve tropical forests for their value in supporting biodiversity and storing carbon emissions.



Map of the main causes of deforestation by geographical area from 2001 to 2019.

The host nation, Gabon, became the first African nation to be recompensed through carbon credits for protecting its forests.

Gabon "absorbs around 100 million tonnes of CO₂ per year... three tonnes every second," White told AFP on the sidelines of the meeting.

"We are well on the way to becoming a sustainable economy."

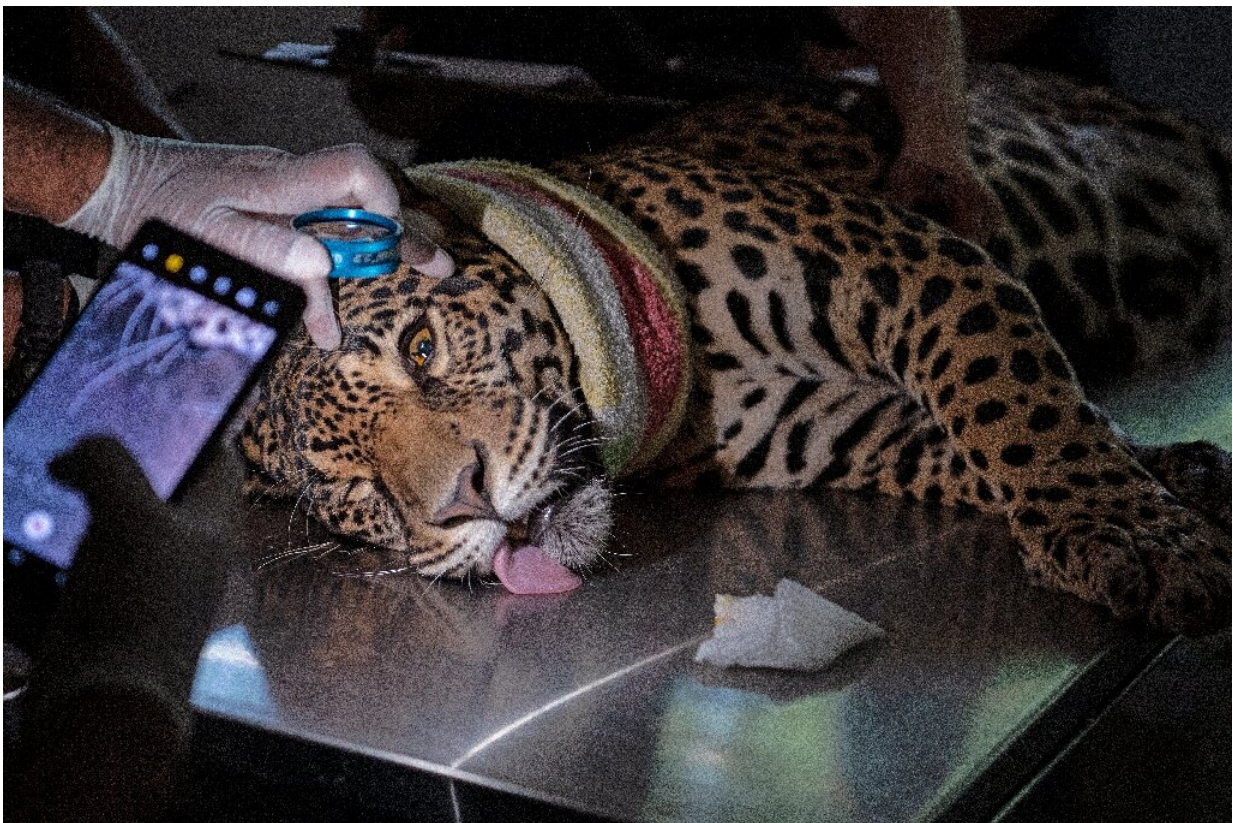
A big focus at the conference will be on the forests of the Congo Basin—a crucial carbon "sink" and haven to rare species that is second in size to Amazonia.

"Around a third of the species in tropical Africa are threatened with

extinction," said Bonaventure Sonke, a professor at the University of Yaounde in Cameroon.

Preserving them requires further knowledge about them, he said.

"We don't know enough about the forests of the Congo Basin because they haven't been sufficiently researched," he said.



Deforestation and fires in the Amazon rainforest are eroding the habitat of jaguars.



An insect feeds on flowers in Lhoknga forest, Indonesia, where deforestation is critical.

In contrast, he said, far more was known about the Amazonian rainforest, "because the resources were committed" to doing so.

Macron will be joining the meeting's summit section on Thursday after flying out from Paris on Wednesday for a four-nation Central African tour.

Other presidents expected to attend are Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo; Faustin Archange Touadera of the Central African Republic; Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno of Chad; and Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea.

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