

# Misguided reforestation programs threaten vast area of Africa's tropical grasslands, study warns

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Savanna, Kenya. Credit: Kate Parr, University of Liverpool

New research led by the University of Liverpool reveals the scale of misguided reforestation projects across Africa. The study reveals that an area the size of France is under threat by forest restoration initiatives due to inappropriate restoration in the form of tree planting.

The paper "Conflation of reforestation with [restoration](#) is widespread" is [published](#) in the journal *Science*.

Researchers analyzed the areas of land committed to restoration via reforestation and found that many programs include areas classified as non-forest systems. They believe that the inclusion of non-forest systems such as savannas and grasslands, which are threatened by increased [tree cover](#), is the key issue.

They warn that planting trees in these [grassy areas](#), which are structurally, functionally and compositionally distinct from forests, could be a risk to wildlife such as rhinos and wildebeest, as well as people who depend on these ecosystems.

Kate Parr, Professor of Tropical Ecology at the University's School of Environmental Sciences and author of the study, said, "Restoration of ecosystems is needed and important, but it must be done in a way that is appropriate to each system.

"Non-forest systems such as savannas are misclassified as forest and therefore considered in need of restoration with trees.

"There is an urgent need to revise definitions so that savannas are not confused with forest because increasing trees is a threat to the integrity and persistence of savannas and grasslands."

"Highlighting this issue now means there is still time to negate this threat and ensure that non-forest systems receive appropriate restoration."



Grassland, Kenya. Credit: Kate Parr, University of Liverpool

Dr. Nicola Stevens, Trapnell Research Fellow in African Environments at the University of Oxford and co-author of the paper said, "The urgency of implementing large-scale tree planting is prompting funding of inadequately assessed projects that will most likely have negligible sequestration benefits and cause potential social and ecological harm."

The study highlights that the issues raised are not unique to Africa and many other non-[forest](#) areas, for example, the open savannas and

grasslands of India and Brazil, could face a similar future due to inappropriate 'restoration' with trees.

The study involved the University of Liverpool, the University of Oxford and Utrecht University.

**More information:** Catherine L. Parr et al, Conflation of reforestation with restoration is widespread, *Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1126/science.adj0899](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adj0899).  
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