

# Ghana's forests are being wiped out: What's behind this, and why attempts to stop it aren't working

May 15 2024, by John Tennyson Afele

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Ghana has around 7.9 million hectares of forested land (35% of the total land area), [according to the Food and Agriculture Organization](#). Around 7.6 million hectares are primary or naturally regenerated forest, and around 297,000 hectares are planted forest. In 2022, [Ghana lost](#) 18,000 hectares of primary forest, a nearly 70% increase from 2021. It was the biggest increase in forest loss of any country in recent years.

A new [study](#) by the [International Union of Forest Research Organizations](#) notes that [deforestation rates](#) have risen despite an abundance of sustainable cocoa standards, corporate pledges and carbon-offset projects. The Conversation Africa's Godfred Akoto Boafo interviewed agroforestry researcher John Tennyson Afele about the rapidly declining forest cover in Ghana.

## What are the main causes of deforestation in Ghana?

There are several factors at play.

- **Agricultural expansion:** Ghana's [population grew](#) from 11.87 million in 1980 to 32.18 million in 2020. This has led to a massive expansion in the number of people taking up farming. It happens even in [forest reserves](#), which cover 16.2% of the country's total land area. In addition, people have moved into new patches of land, mostly in forests and reserves, as a result of the soil in traditional farming areas losing its fertility. This has been as a result of [continuous cultivation](#).

Ghana is the [second biggest producer](#) of cocoa in the world. Its cocoa farms are a major cause of deforestation. They often clear forests to establish new plantations, resorting to slash-and-burn methods that degrade land. This is a method of cultivation in which forests are burned

before they are cleared for planting. A [recent study](#) traced back 26,000 ha of cocoa-driven deforestation in protected areas in Ghana since 2000.

- **Wood for fuel:** Most rural Ghanaians rely heavily on forests for household energy. Trees are harvested for firewood and secondary products like charcoal.
- **Mining:** Ghana is rich in mineral resources such as gold and manganese. It has overtaken South Africa as the [leading gold producer](#) in Africa.

Mining is another major cause of deforestation. [More than 13,000ha](#) of forest land is under mining lease to mining companies. But small scale miners, known as galamseyers, work illegally in concessions leased by the companies and are the major culprits of destructive and uncontrolled mining activities.

A [high percentage](#) of these illegal operations take place in the Ashanti, Bono East, Ahafo, Bono, Eastern, Central, Western and Western North regions. These areas contain about 70% of Ghana's rainforests.

Mining activities also pollute waterways and disrupt the ecological balance, through access roads and waste disposals.

- **Logging:** Illegal logging by the timber industry is a [persistent threat](#). Weak governance, corruption and inadequate enforcement allow loggers to exploit valuable timber resources.

These direct causes are often driven by deeper issues like poverty, limited access to land and alternative livelihoods, corruption, poor governance and limited awareness of sustainable practices. Farmers might feel compelled to clear forests for immediate income, and

communities might not have access to affordable clean energy sources.

## How bad is the situation?

Ghana has experienced [a drastic decline in forest cover over the past decades. The Global Forest Watch report in 2022](#) indicated Ghana lost 18,000 hectares of natural forest, equivalent to 78Mt of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This represents a 60% increase from 2018, making Ghana the country with the highest relative increase in primary forest loss among all tropical countries.

The potential consequences of deforestation in Ghana are far-reaching. They include:

- **Biodiversity loss:** Forests are home to a vast array of plant and animal species. Deforestation destroys habitats, leading to species extinction and a decline in overall biodiversity.
- **Climate change:** Trees are the major terrestrial carbon sink and absorb carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas. Deforestation reduces this sequestration capacity, exacerbating climate change and contributing to rising temperatures.
- **Soil erosion:** Forest cover protects the soil from the elements. Without this protection, [soil erosion](#) increases, leading to reduced fertility and agricultural productivity.
- **Water scarcity:** Forests play a role in regulating water cycles. Deforestation disrupts these patterns, leading to irregular rainfall patterns, increased risk of floods and potential water scarcity.
- **Livelihoods at risk:** Forests provide resources and income opportunities for many communities. Deforestation threatens

these livelihoods, affecting everything from food security to medicinal plants and traditional practices.

## **Why have current approaches not helped?**

Ghana has implemented various initiatives to combat deforestation. But the situation persists. There are a number of reasons.

Firstly, there's a limited focus on underlying causes. Many approaches focus on directly addressing deforestation activities, like stricter logging regulations or promoting tree planting. But without tackling the root causes like poverty and lack of sustainable alternatives, deforestation continues.

Secondly, market-based approaches are often adopted. Strategies like carbon offsetting or sustainable certification schemes as well as Nationally Determined Contributions have limitations. Leakage, where conservation efforts in one area displace deforestation to another, remains a concern.

Additionally, these approaches might not adequately address the needs of local communities. Over-reliance on offsets can distract efforts to address the root causes of deforestation, such as poverty and lack of sustainable alternatives. Again, effectively monitoring and verifying the impact of market-based approaches can be difficult.

Thirdly, there's weak enforcement and governance. Inadequate enforcement of existing regulations against illegal logging and mining allows these activities to thrive. Corruption and lack of transparency further hinder progress. The present government introduced [flagship programs](#) like those code-named Halt and Vanguard to end illegal small-scale mining. They have not been effective, mainly because of weak law

enforcement and governance.

Fourth, communities are disconnected from conservation efforts. They aren't involved, which can lead to resentment and a lack of ownership. Empowering communities and ensuring they benefit from conservation is necessary for long-term success.

Lastly, monitoring and evaluating conservation initiatives can be difficult. Reliable data and transparent reporting mechanisms are essential to assess progress and adapt strategies.

## What is the way forward?

Combating deforestation in Ghana requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses the root causes and promotes sustainable practices.

- **Sustainable agriculture:** Supporting techniques like agroforestry, where trees are integrated into farms, and shade-grown cocoa can reduce pressure on forests while maintaining agricultural productivity. Education on nature-based solutions and general sustainability can increase yield, maintain soil fertility and enhance profits of farmers.
- **Stronger law enforcement and governance:** Stricter measures against illegal activities, coupled with improved governance and reduced corruption, are essential.
- **Community involvement:** Engaging local communities in [conservation efforts](#), ensuring they benefit from forest protection, and providing alternative livelihoods.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Ghana's forests are being wiped out: What's behind this, and why attempts to stop it aren't working (2024, May 15) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-ghana-forests.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.