

The world lost a Belgium-size area of old growth rainforest in 2018

BY MORGAN ERICKSON-DAVIS ON 25 APRIL 2019

by [Morgan Erickson-Davis](#) on 25 April 2019

- *Newly released data indicate the tropics lost around 120,000 square kilometers (around 46,300 square miles) of tree cover last year – or an area of forest the size of Nicaragua.*
- *The data indicate 36,400 square kilometers of this loss – an area the size of Belgium – occurred in primary forest. This number is an increase over the annual average, and the third-highest amount since data collection began.*
- *Indonesia primary forest loss dropped to the lowest level recorded since 2002. Brazil's numbers are also down compared to the last two years, but still higher than the 18-year average.*
- *Meanwhile, primary rainforest deforestation appears to be on the rise elsewhere. Colombia recorded the highest level since measurement began at the beginning of the century. Madagascar had the highest proportion of its tropical forest lost in 2018; Ghana experienced the biggest proportional change over 2017.*

At first glance, the news seems good: global tropical deforestation declined for the second year in a row, according to new satellite data. But

digging in a little deeper reveals a more complicated, grimmer reality.

The data, released today by World Resources Institute (WRI) on its forest monitoring platform [Global Forest Watch \(GFW\)](#), show how much tree cover was lost in 2018, and where this loss happened. These data come from satellite images that are collated and analyzed by the University of Maryland in the U.S. and can pinpoint areas of canopy loss as small as 30 meters.

Overall, the data indicate the tropics lost around 120,000 square kilometers (around 46,300 square miles) of tree cover last year – or an area of forest the size of Nicaragua. This number is down from the previous two years, when around 170,000 and 160,000 square kilometers were respectively lost in 2016 and 2017. But 2018's total is still well above the 18-year average since data collection began in 2001.

"It's tempting to celebrate a second year of decline since peak tree cover loss in 2016," said Frances Seymour, Distinguished Senior Fellow at WRI. "But if you look back over the last 18 years, it's clear that the overall trend is still



upward. We are nowhere near winning this battle.”



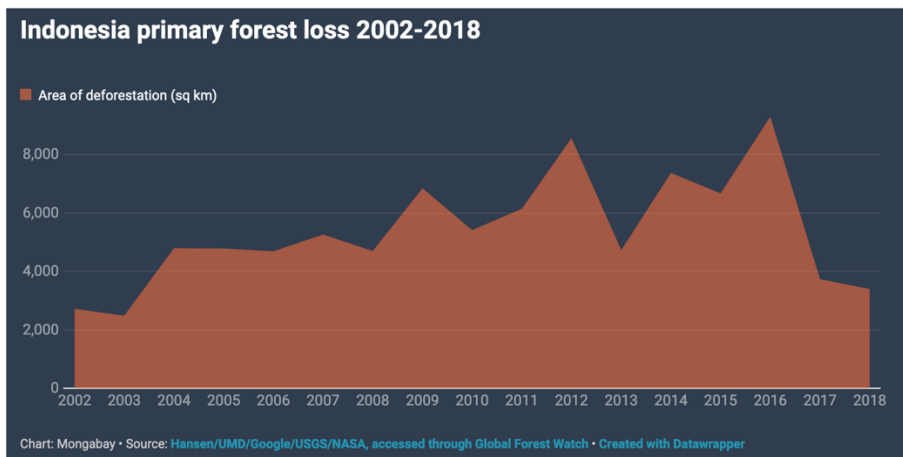
The world's rainforests are home to multitudes of animals and plants, such as this dusky titi monkey (Callicebus spp), which lives in the forests of Peru.

In an [analysis](#) released with the data today, GFW zooms in on primary forest; that is, forest that hasn't been logged or degraded in recent history. Overall, it finds that around 36,400 square

kilometers of primary forest was deforested in the humid tropics in 2018, which is a jump from the annual average and the third-highest level since 2002.

Brazil and Indonesia, long the global heavy-hitters when it comes to tropical deforestation, together account for 46 percent of all primary rainforest loss in 2018. While this is a big chunk, it represents a significant decline over the 71 percent they contributed in 2002.

Indonesia in particular saw a big drop in primary forest loss last year, with 3,400 square kilometers deforested. This is the smallest level of loss recorded since 2002 and a significant drop from the high mark in 2016, which saw more than 9,000 square kilometers lost, due largely to catastrophic forest fires that raged out of control for months. A drying El Nino event coupled with the draining of peatland for agriculture has been blamed for [catalyzing the blaze](#), and its smoke may have contributed to the premature deaths of [as many as 100,000 people](#).

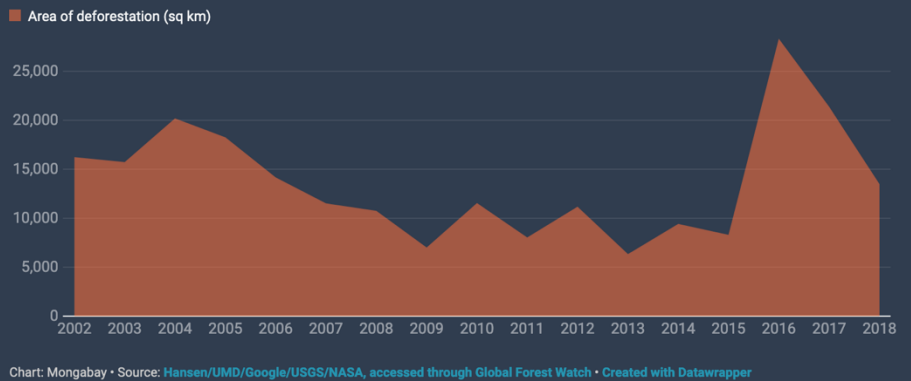


Researchers credit Indonesia's deforestation reduction to forest protection policies. The logging of primary forest was banned in 2011, and more recently the government instituted a ban on the draining and development of peatland forest following the 2015/2016 wildfire crisis. However, with another El Nino expected to affect the region later this year, forest authorities are still concerned Indonesia may be in for yet another bad fire season.

As with Indonesia, Brazil experienced unprecedented primary forest loss in 2016, also due largely to fires. While 2018 loss was markedly lower, levels are still higher than the 2002-2015 average. Drivers behind last year's deforestation include fire as well as clear-cutting in the Amazon. The data show several illegal deforestation hotspots in protected indigenous territories – [including in Ituna Itata reserve](#), which is [inhabited by uncontacted peoples](#).



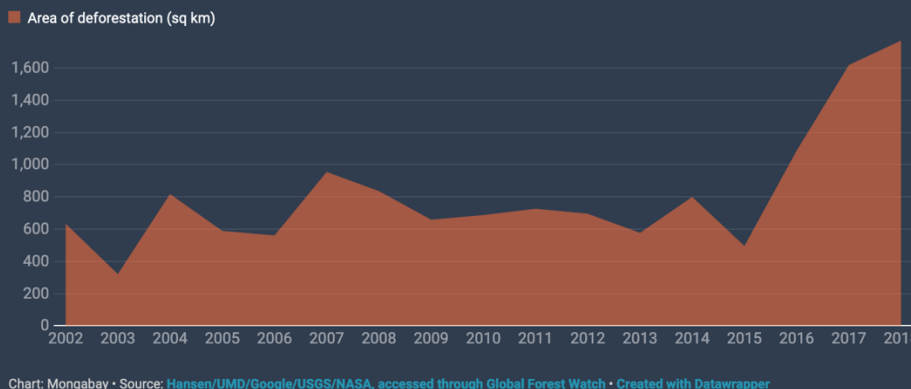
Brazil primary forest loss 2002-2018



As Brazil and Indonesia have made strides in reducing their overall deforestation rates since the early part of the century, in other countries they've been ramping up. One of the most dramatic cases is Colombia, which in 2018 recorded its highest level of tree cover loss since

measurement began. Last year, nearly 1,800 square kilometers of primary rainforest was deforested in the country, marking a 9 percent increase over 2017 and a jump of more than 500 percent over the lowest level recorded in 2003.

Colombia primary forest loss 2002-2018



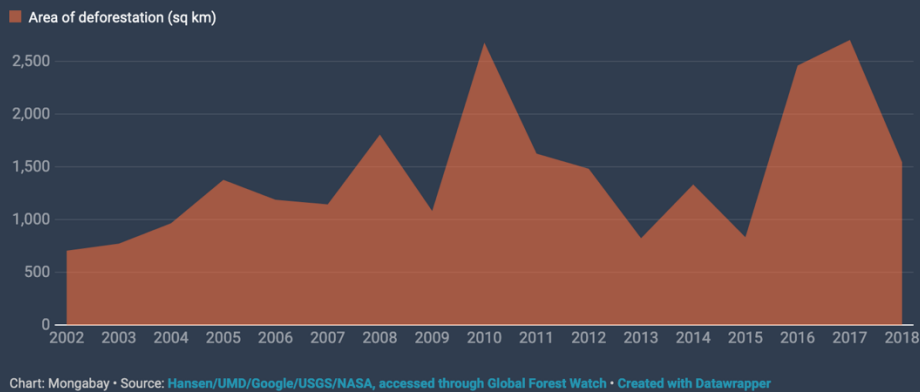
Colombia's deforestation appears to be driven in large part by the vacuum created when FARC dissidents left their forest strongholds following the 2016 peace agreement between the country's guerrilla group and the government. Once off-limits due to the threat of violence, vast tracts of old growth rainforest were suddenly [open for business](#), and land speculators moved

in to clear the land for cattle ranching and plantations.

Industrial agriculture is also the main driver of deforestation to the south in Bolivia, which saw 1,545 square kilometers of primary rainforest lost in 2018. This number is a reduction from 2017's 15-year high, but is still more than the annual average for the country.



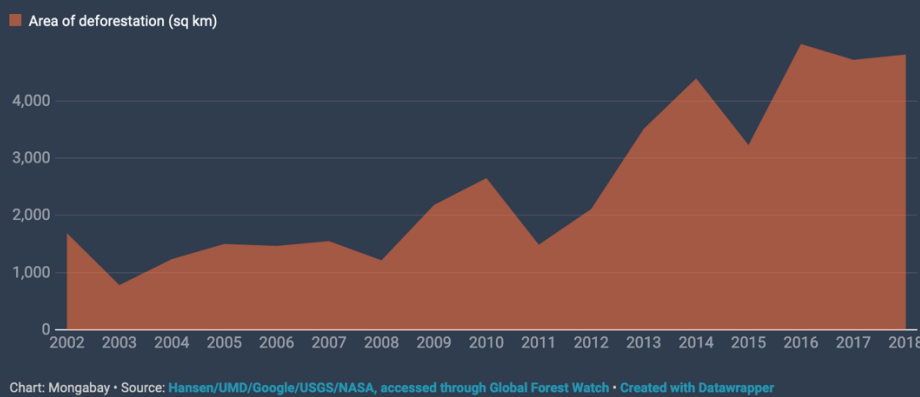
Bolivia primary forest loss 2002-2018



Over in Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) recorded one of its highest deforestation rates, losing more than 4,800 square kilometers of primary rainforest. That

number is around twice the country's yearly average since 2002 and second only to 2016 for the most forest lost since the beginning of the century.

DRC primary forest loss 2002-2018



Drivers here include small-scale farming and fuelwood collection, which GFW analysts say caused around 75 percent of the loss. However, medium-sized agriculture and [conflict](#) appear to be playing growing roles.

Madagascar gained the notorious title of losing the largest percentage of its primary rainforest in 2018, with 2 percent gone in the space of a year. Shifting agriculture (commonly referred to as "slash-and-burn") was likely responsible for much of this. Mining – illegal for sapphires, legal for nickel – is also [taking a huge toll](#) on the island's unique forests.

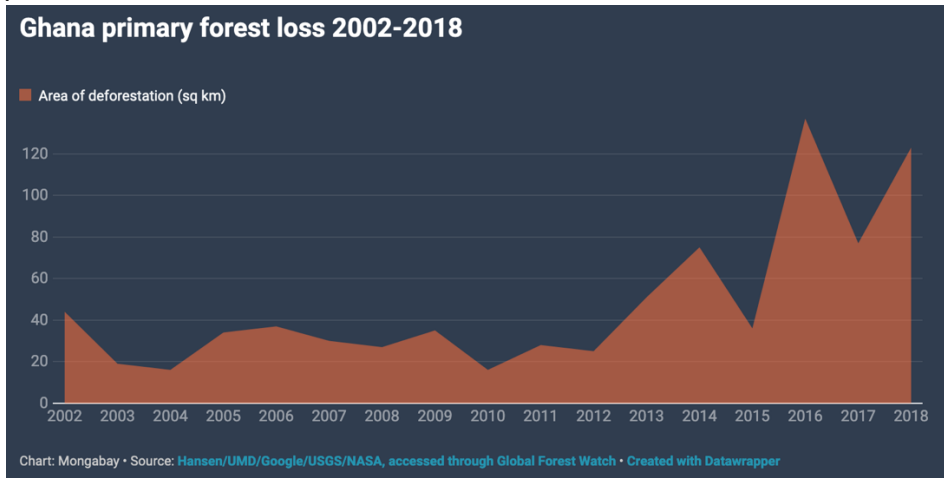


Madagascar's famous for its towering baobab trees



New deforestation frontiers emerged in several countries. Most notable is Ghana, which had the largest increase in primary forest loss of any country between 2017 and 2018. The West African nation lost 60 percent more old growth rainforest than it did in 2017, owing largely to [illegal mining](#) and [cocoa farming](#). These are also problems for the forests of Côte d'Ivoire, which

had the second-highest deforestation increase between 2017 and 2018. Protected areas have not been immune to deforestation, with GFW numbers showing 70 percent of 2018 loss occurred in forests granted some form of official protection.



The world's primary rainforests are not only home to a diverse array of species, they also form the backbone of plans to slow global warming. One of the most ambitious is REDD+, a scheme through which wealthier countries provide financial incentives to tropical developing countries to help them keep their forests in the ground.

While REDD+ has attracted [criticism](#), many in the conservation community believe it has the power to change the game when it comes to reducing deforestation. Seymour is one of these optimists, saying that she believes REDD+ has a "bright future ahead despite the somewhat troubled history."

"We have to give countries incentives—including results-based finance and access to markets for deforestation-free goods—to make the tough choices and forward-looking investments necessary for success" Seymour said.

She believes that by investing in tropical forest countries, we can affect change – change that is sorely, increasingly, alarmingly needed.

"Behind these charts and statistics are heartbreaking losses of biological diversity and existential threats to indigenous peoples, not to mention diminishment of efforts to stabilize the global climate," Seymour said. "The moral imperative to act on these numbers is unquestionably urgent."

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