

Deforestation in Congo basin slows, but for how long?

- 13:33 24 July 2013 by [Fred Pearce](#)
- For similar stories, visit the [Endangered Species](#) and [Energy and Fuels](#) Topic Guides

Good news from the jungles of Africa. The rate of deforestation in the centre of the continent is down by more than a third – and the savannah woodlands to the north and south may actually be increasing.

New analysis of images from [NASA's Landsat satellites](#) has found that 18,000 square kilometres of forest was destroyed in the Congo basin between 2000 and 2010, a net loss of 1 per cent. That figure was sharply down on the 29,000 square kilometres lost in the preceding decade, says Philippe Mayaux of the [European Commission's Joint Research Centre](#) in Ispra, Italy.

According to Mayaux, the reprieve is partly because of sluggish economic growth in Africa, and partly because foreign investment there has concentrated on mining and oil rather than logging or commercial agriculture. This is in contrast to south-east Asia, where [forest clearance](#) for pulp and paper manufacture, and [for palm oil production](#), has been in overdrive.

Even more encouraging is a separate study that looked at changes to woodland cover in the savannah regions either side of the Congo basin. [Edward Mitchard](#) and Clara Flintrop of the University of Edinburgh, UK, have reviewed 16 existing studies of forest cover and concluded that regrowth of woodland in these areas has exceeded loss.

"Africa's woodlands and savannahs are reforesting," says Mitchard. He says this regreening, which has been under way since at least the mid-1980s, is happening as farmers move to the cities and abandon their land. His [own field research](#) shows that "in central Cameroon, the forest is coming back really fast – it is exciting news".

Deforestation bias

Mitchard and Flintrop argue that many studies are biased towards detecting deforestation as opposed to a forest's recovery. This is understandable because deforestation is sudden and so easier to detect, and most monitoring bodies are set up because of concerns over losses.

The slowdown in African deforestation parallels a similar trend in Brazil. According to the Brazilian Ministry of Environment, since 2004 [deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon](#), the world's largest rainforest, [has fallen by more than 70 per cent](#).

Not everyone is convinced the trend will last, however. Campaigner Simon Counsell of the London-based charity [Rainforest Foundation UK](#) says there has been a revival of forest clearance in the Congo basin since 2010, much of it for palm-oil plantations. "According to our calculations, deforestation in the Republic of the Congo has nearly doubled in the past year, and in Gabon by 150 per cent."

"Central Africa is at a pivotal moment," agrees [Simon Lewis](#) of the University of Leeds, UK. [Land-grabbing by industrial agriculture](#) could see central Africa follow a similar path of

destruction as south-east Asia, he says.

Journal reference: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, DOI: [10.1098/rstb.2012.0300](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2012.0300) and [10.1098/rstb.2012.0406](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2012.0406)