

Progress on slowing deforestation could boost climate efforts, say experts

Reduction in primary forest loss in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as Brazil and Colombia, offers hope for tropical forests across the world

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- A government environmental agent inspects logged Amazon trees in Pará state as part of efforts to combat deforestation in Brazil, January 2023. Photograph: Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters

Falling deforestation rates in countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Colombia and Brazil could provide a boost to climate and biodiversity efforts, experts say, in the run-up to a key summit on the future of the **Amazon rainforest**.

In the coming days, the Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, will host a pan-Amazonian summit **on the future of the world's largest rainforest**, with leaders from Venezuela to Peru hoping to present a plan at Cop28 to halt their

destruction. Experts have said if rich countries provide backing to tropical forested countries it could help governments deliver on Cop26 promises to **halt and reverse deforestation by 2030**.

Carlos Nobre, one of Brazil's leading climate scientists who has warned that **the Amazon is close to passing a tipping point**, said there was a moment of opportunity to protect the world's forests.

“I can see a greater political movement all over the world to reduce deforestation – **Indonesia**, some countries in Africa, many countries in the Amazon. In Brazil, there was a significant reduction in deforestation in June. Ideally speaking, I hope when you compute 2023 compared with 2022, there may be a 50% reduction, which would be very good. If Brazil wants to reach zero deforestation by 2030, getting a 50% drop would be very good news,” he said.

Brazil's environment minister, Marina Silva, told the Guardian last week that deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon **fell by at least 60% in July**.

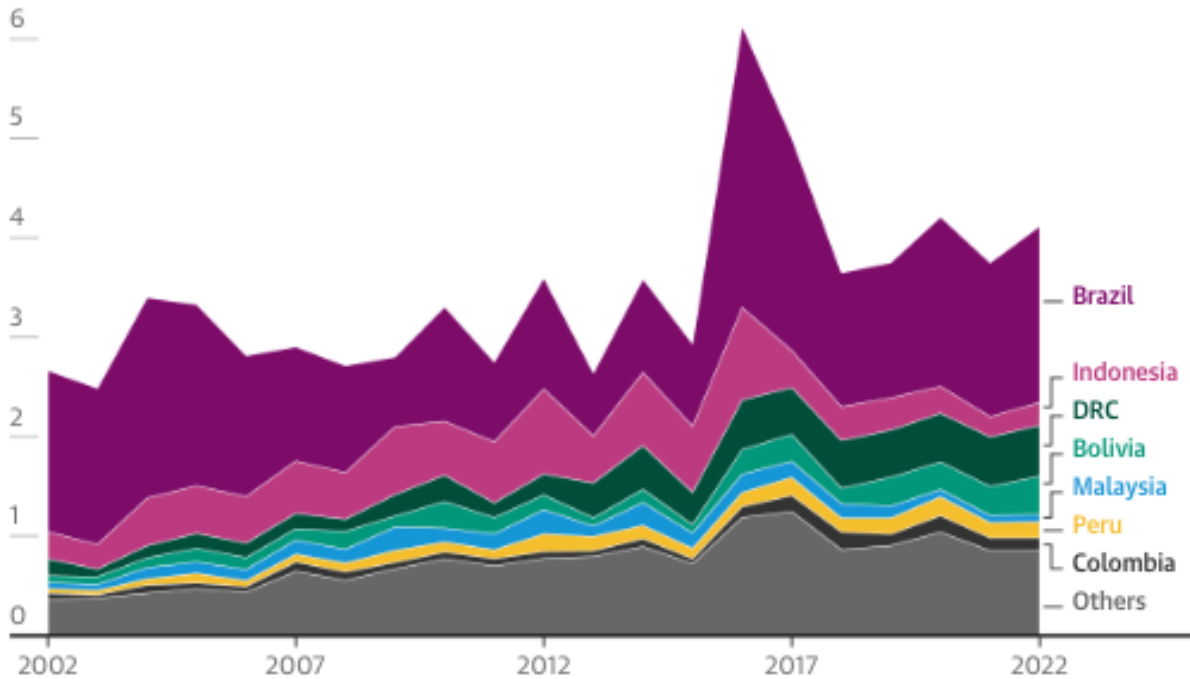
Until recently, Brazil under Lula's first administration was the only example of a large tropical forested country that had achieved a substantial and sustained drop in forest loss, **falling by 84% between 2004 and 2012**, a trend that was reversed under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro.

But experts say Indonesia and Malaysia – the world's two largest palm oil producers – have followed Brazil's historic example. **Indonesia reduced its primary forest loss by 64%**, comparing the three years after the fires with 2020 to 2022, more than any other country, according to monitoring organisation Global Forest Watch (GFW). Malaysia achieved a 57% drop.

With Brazil again recording a significant drop in deforestation since the start of Lula's current presidency, and **Colombia showing signs that its forest loss is slowing**, there is cautious optimism, **despite continued losses in 2022**.

The world has lost more than 72m hectares of primary forest in the past 21 years

Annual primary forest loss, million hectares. Countries ordered by total loss, 2002-22



Guardian graphic. Source: Global Forest Watch/University of Maryland. Note: named countries are those with the highest total loss between 2002 and 2022

Liz Goldman, senior geographic information system research manager for GFW, said: “From a data point of view, I think Indonesia and **Malaysia** should be included as success stories. They have been for a number of years now, ever since the 2015 fires [inked to the El Niño]. We’re really seeing government and corporate actions coming together to have a positive influence there.

“The thing that’s out of everybody’s control is the weather. There hasn’t been the same type of El Niño drought conditions as 2015 but there is one coming this year.”

Arief Wijaya, programme director for the World Resources Institute in Indonesia, said increased law enforcement, peatland restoration, fire mitigation efforts and farming bans in sensitive areas contributed to the fall in deforestation.

“I think the government has done quite a good job. Indonesia has followed the example of Lula’s first administration. But what happened in **Brazil**? When the election came, priorities changed. We have to look at the election next year in Indonesia. We have to look at the priorities of the next government and if they

will really show the commitment and leadership to maintain the levels of deforestation,” he said.

Wijaya urged caution about the EU’s new deforestation law, which bans commodities linked to forest loss after 2020, amid **complaints from Malaysia and other countries** that it does not recognise the progress some countries have made.



Forests in the Maliau Basin in Malaysian Borneo. Malaysia has achieved a 57% drop in deforestation in recent years. Photograph: RGB Ventures/SuperStock/Alamy

“From the perspective of the government of Indonesia or Malaysia, palm oil is no longer a driver of deforestation. The EU should be much more careful in trying to implement the regulations. In my view, the palm oil sector is no longer a major driver,” he said.



'Alarming' rate of mountain forest loss a threat to wildlife

Nobre underscored the importance of international support to combat deforestation in the Amazon.

“The European Union and even China, which is the largest importer of food products from Brazil, they are saying in negotiations with the Brazilian government that they do not want to import food products from new deforestation. It’s not a legal framework but they are communicating that. The US and UK as well. Now, under president Lula, the illegal land grabbers and illegal deforesters are very concerned,” he said.

“Only combating illegality may slow down loss for some years but we have to find a new economy. We have to find ways to finance a standing forest,” he said.