

Do you want trees with that? How to stop consumer products destroying the rainforests

By [Nick Rowley](#)

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If we are to succeed in tackling climate change, it is vital that we preserve the terrestrial carbon locked up in our forests and soils.



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Even putting the climate benefits aside, the value of our forests is immense. Rainforests cover just 6% of Earth's surface but are [home to 80% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity](#), with many species still to be discovered and named.

With the [US National Cancer Institute](#) having already commercialised products from rainforest plants, better treatments for many of humanity's most intractable illnesses may lie hidden in forests that are currently being cut down or burned.

An estimated [half a million square kilometres](#) of forest - two and half times the size of Great Britain - were cut down between 2000 and 2010. But while numbers can be hard to visualise, flying above the forests of Sumatra or Kalimantan gives a clear view of the often industrial-scale exploitation that has occurred.

It is a problem of epic scale. No longer is it sweaty men with large saws, a couple of trucks and a bulldozer. When the forests of Southeast Asia are cleared it can be a military-sized operation: thousands of people with hundreds of machines

clearing the land of all its biodiversity, stored carbon and unaccountable value. A job that would once have taken months is now over in hours.

The wood from these majestic, unique places goes on to make not only identifiable products like paper, tissue and kitchen towel, but also the cardboard packaging, stickers and paper that surrounds much else of what we buy. And with forests also cleared for agriculture, the [palm oil](#) alone produced on previously forested land is found in about [half of the products on our supermarket shelves](#).

Tracking the sources of all these products is hard - so hard that it is tempting just to disengage. But, as with climate change, we can't abstain from trying just because it's difficult.

Taking action

And there are reasons for hope. Over the past five years organisations such as Greenpeace have done an outstanding job in revealing the scourge of landscape-scale deforestation. Their global, highly creative campaigns against companies like [Nestle](#), [Mattel](#) and [Disney](#) have urged consumers to think hard about the deforestation behind the products on their shelves.

Greenpeace targeted Mattel after alleging that Barbie's packaging comes from rainforest destruction.

In turn, this has prompted major [agribusinesses](#) and [paper companies](#) that supply those brands to commit to zero-deforestation practices.

Having had a role to play in some of the [regional forest agreements](#) in New South Wales in the 1990s, I know how challenging implementing these commitments would be, even in a developed country like Australia. It is harder still in the muddled, multilayered and complex bureaucracies of many Southeast Asian countries.

Ignitions and emissions

Two weeks ago I was Singapore. The air was choked with acrid smoke from the [forest and peat fires in nearby Sumatra](#). Schools were closed, sporting events cancelled, and people told to stay indoors. The [last major Indonesian forest fires in 1997](#) not only had a devastating effect on the landscape and human health; they also produced [an estimated 40% of the all the world's greenhouse emissions that year](#) - the biggest annual jump in carbon dioxide on record.

The costs for Singaporeans are massive - not only to their health but also to the reputation of the island state. How these fires were set, and who is to blame, is unclear.

The sole benefit of this ongoing tragedy of the commons is that it serves to focus attention on the problem. And there is potential that the upcoming [United Nations climate Summit in Paris](#) could deliver real progress on avoiding deforestation.

From peat fires to Paris

Several factors are coming together. First, the UN has worked hard on getting major businesses to acknowledge the need to halt deforestation. The [New York Declaration on Forests](#) pledges to halve the rate of global forest loss by 2020, and seeks to end it completely by 2030.

Of course, that is weaker than what is required. But at least it is a start, and through signing the declaration, major businesses like McDonalds, WalMart and Unilever have shown their concern and will now have to deliver.

Second, following Greenpeace's high-profile campaigns, companies that operate in Asia such as [Asia Pulp and Paper](#), [Wilmar](#) and others have now made far stronger commitments than the New York Declaration. We should hope fervently that they succeed, because if they can't find a way to satisfy consumer demand using plantations, there is little hope for native forests.

Third, the [Forest Stewardship Council](#), having played a key role in helping educate consumers, retailers and producers through its [certification schemes](#), recognises that there is now a need to go beyond certification and to ensure responsible forest management is driven by clear principles and a process of [constant improvement](#). Placing a logo on a product and hoping to insulate yourself against criticism is very different to the strategic choice that, as a business, you are committed to eradicating native forest material from your products.

Finally, climate finance targeted at developing countries is beginning to chip away at the economic incentives to exploit forested land. To date, the issue has been impenetrable to anyone lacking the patience to decipher the jargon-laden negotiations behind the [UN Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation \(REDD+\)](#) program. But with the UN's renewed focus, the desire of businesses to commit to zero deforestation, and the political need for the Paris talks to deliver tangible progress, a powerful market driver to protecting forests could yet become a reality.

No sensible person wants the things they buy to come with a side serving of environmental destruction. With progress on international policy, effective advocacy, public awareness and business commitments, we may just still be able to protect what's left of the world's great tropical rainforests.

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