

## **Honduran Forests under Pressure**

*A February 2008 report from the US Embassy Tegucigalpa, Honduras*

**Summary:** *Despite moderate progress recently, Honduran forests continue to disappear at a rate of about 2-3 percent a year, according to informed sources. Honduras lost about 37 percent of its forests from 1990 to 2005. Though a new forestry law will offer additional protection for already protected areas, it most likely will only keep deforestation from worsening. Few expect the Honduran forest situation to improve significantly over the long term without additional measures.*

### ***Shrinking Forests***

Honduras has the most intact tropical forests in Central America, thanks primarily to their inaccessibility. Over 75 percent of Honduras is or was forest, primarily pine. Protected areas contain mostly tropical woods such as mahogany and cedar. According to various Honduran government and NGO sources, population growth, poverty, and lack of planning have contributed to deforestation of between two and three percent a year over the past few decades. According to the Honduran Forestry Service (COHDEFOR), cutting of trees for firewood is the primary cause of deforestation. More than half of Honduras's total energy demand is met by wood. One well respected forest group conducted a study that revealed the average rural family cuts down and consumes 30 trees a year for fuel. The second-largest cause of deforestation is clearing land for agriculture, followed by logging for lumber to build houses and furniture. As neither fuel wood consumption nor clearing land requires logs to be transported over a significant distance, these activities are hard to prevent within protected areas.

In the last two years, the number of COHDEFOR employees has been reduced from 800 to 350. This has partially been offset by the use since 2006 of the Honduran military to patrol forests, a tactic that has shown mixed results. Informed sources acknowledge that the military presence has deterred some of the less politically connected from engaging in the illegal forest product trade. All agree that COHDEFOR is under-funded and under-staffed. Few people involved in the transport of illegal lumber are prosecuted, and virtually none of the "big fish" have been brought to justice.

On the positive side, authorities recently adopted a new certificate for legal timber that is harder to counterfeit. Honduran government and NGO sources confirm that the price of wood has increased significantly in recent years, a signal of scarcity that may lead to more concerted protective efforts.

### ***Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve***

The Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve covers 525,000 hectares, roughly 7 percent of the national territory. It contains a central zone and a less-protected buffer area, which

has seen some encroachment. Still, in 2007 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) removed the Rio Platano reserve from the list of endangered World Heritage sites, based on actions that the Honduran government has taken to reduce pressure on the zone. These include the 1997 enlargement of the buffer zone, the undertaking of several current and future forest management projects, and the involvement of GTZ, which has provided more than US\$6 million in funding.

One major step is a new forestry law signed by President Manuel Zelaya in February 2008. Among other things, this new law makes environmental damage to forests a crime and elevates COHDEFOR to ministerial status, although it will still technically be part of the Ministry of Agriculture. Implementing regulations for the new law are expected within six months. GTZ considers the new law to be a significant positive step for protected areas, strengthening enforcement and clarifying important administrative details. Some environmental groups, however, think the law does not go far enough. They say it continues to favor land use over land conservation in the non-protected areas and emphasizes private property and investment rights over the benefits forests provide to the public, such as clean air and water. Nonetheless, this is the first new forestry law in 35 years and suggests that, despite resource constraints, Zelaya is making an effort to protect the forests.

### ***The Root of the Matter***

By signing the new forestry law, directing the military to assist in protecting the forests and inviting foreign diplomats and media to visit the biosphere, President Zelaya has taken positive action to combat deforestation. However, doubts remain as to whether these efforts will result in improved forest protection. NGOs and even private businesses are more involved than the Honduran government in many day-to-day environmental activities, such as finding green energy solutions, removing squatters from protected land and finding them employment, monitoring forests and providing financial assistance. One option for protecting the forests is regulated commercial harvesting and replanting of trees. Agroforestry in Honduras is still a relatively unexploited opportunity. With an appropriate emphasis on access controls, permits, and replanting, those who make their living from the forests could both prosper financially and protect their forest livelihood. For this to happen, though, additional steps will be required to address the non-protected forest areas of the country.