
FOREST FOR PEOPLE – REFLECTING YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

Life on Earth today consists of many millions of distinct species of plants and trees; and it was timely for United Nations to declare year 2011 as the International Year of Forests.

Rapid environmental changes have over the years led to the destruction of majority of the forests that have existed on Earth. The destructions are mainly due to human activities, in particular, deforestation. Destruction is being driven by the rapid rise in world population, especially related to tropical forest destruction. Such is the demand for land, furniture and other products derived from forests that nations are left with no alternatives but to give in at the expense of the Earth's green lungs.

However, in most cases forests have proven to be men's best friend as it is widely associated with drug discovery and the availability of medicinal resources. The leaves, bark and wood of trees have been found to contain hundreds of life saving compounds used to manufacture medicine. Apart from this, a wide range of resources (materials) such as oil, gums, resins, waxes, edible oils, dyes, cosmetics, spices, fruits and nuts are all derived directly from forests. Forests produce a wealth of useful species.

Forests play an essential as well as a crucial role in global weather and climatic patterns. The cooling effect of forests results from leaf transpiration; generating moisture that rises to the atmosphere, forming clouds which release water as rain or other precipitation. When forests are cut, the climate dries as rainfall decreases and soils lose moisture. Tree roots absorb about half of the rain that falls, releasing water gradually during the year. In countries with wet and dry seasons like Fiji, water retention by trees makes the difference between deadly floods that kill numerous people and sweep away precious topsoil.

Cutting forests for financial gain or to resettle people from rural-urban migration provides developing countries such as ours with short-term solutions to problems. Neither the extremely important ecological roles that forests play, nor their value as species storehouses, are appreciated by the majority of the world's nations.

The recent spate of massive landslides and floods after periods of heavy rain in countries around the world has, in most cases, been traced to logging that left hillsides and entire regions open to erosion. Millions of people have been left homeless around the world in recent years, and thousands have lost their lives to such floods. These floods may be only a prelude to far more serious and long-lasting consequences of forest destruction.

Global warming will increase as forests vanish, especially with the cutting of old-growth trees, which have immense canopies for absorbing carbon dioxide and cooling the atmosphere. Higher temperatures have already brought droughts, increased desertification and caused rivers and streams to lose volume and even dry up. The drought in the Western division of Fiji last year was only an indication of the predicament to follow in the coming years.

Forests support a number of natural ecosystem processes and services such as air quality, water purification and prevention of erosion. They also reduce temperatures by shading surfaces, dissipating heat through evaporation, and controlling air movement responsible for adverted heat. In addition, by slowing rainwater so that it can be absorbed into the ground, forests help filter pollutants and sediment from our waters while replenishing aquifers and keeping annual stream flows steady. Trees in forests help control pollution through acting as biological and physical nets. It has been found that one acre of trees generates enough oxygen each day for 18 people.

Many people derive value from forests through leisure activities such as hiking, birdwatching and natural history study. Forests are also known to be rich in cultural wealth, having a long human history, with many acquiring cultural significance and meaning. They are a source for both self discovery, public education and a place of spiritual renewal. Forests foster the idea in the back of our mind that we can have the integrity to leave a place alone and achieve peace within ourselves.

With population, pollution is also on the rise. Just imagine the noise made by the 7 billion people on earth? Nonetheless, trees provide 'white noise', 'the noise of the leaves and branches in the wind and associated natural sounds, which masks other man-caused sounds.

It was encouraging to see the Fiji Government launch its "Plant a Million Trees" campaign last year. Such initiatives will promote the importance of trees among communities and at the same time ensure that Fiji plays its part in global efforts to combat global warming and greenhouse effect.

In the last decade, developments have also taken place in my community regarding forests. With the help of OISCA, an organisation from Japan, a primary school was able to plant more than 2000 pine trees on its idle land. In addition, people have also planted fruit trees such as coconut, mango and pawpaw to attain maximum utility. A secondary school also had done its bit to contribute to the environment by planting mango trees near the highway to prevent erosion.

The level of employment in forestry is an indicator of the socio-economic value of the sector as well as of the impact of forests on people. During logging season, companies such as Fiji Pine and Tropic Woods employ people to cut trees as well as carry out replanting programmes. This is clearly evident in Nabou, midway between Nadi and Sigatoka. Forests also play a vital part of eco-tourism which is becoming very popular in Fiji like the Kula Eco-Park in Sigatoka. It is also a method of conserving the environment.

In conclusion, the period since the emergence of humans has displayed an ongoing destruction in forests. The destruction of forests with their beautiful environment and multitude of life may result in collapsed ecosystems that can never be restored. However, since forests are for people, we, as responsible citizens, must work together in conserving forests as it is important for the survival of human life.

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