

## CHOPPING TREES-THE END OF THE RAIN FOREST

You are probably reading this from a book made of paper. You may be sitting on a chair which has a wooden frame or leaning on a table made from wood. Wood is one of the natural resources that we use and rarely wonder where it comes from.

Once upon a time most of the Earth was covered by forest. From the Polar Regions to the equator, people have felled the trees. Farmers have made clearings to grow crops. Now the clearing is happening much faster as other people join native farmers. Loggers take the wood away and plantation growers clear large areas to plant crops like bananas.

In the tropics of South America, Africa and Asia, about 7% of the forest disappears each year. That's an area the size of a football pitches every second of every day of the year.

## A WALK IN THE AMAZON RAIN FOREST

It is dull and the air is wet here under the canopy of trees. We travelled for two hours up a river from the coast and now we are being led by our guide to meet some farmers deep in the rain forest. There is very little undergrowth. The leaves of the great trees block out most of the light so few plants can grow at ground level. Wet, squelchy leaf litter covers the earth. We can see many types of insect busy breaking up the plant material. Overhead we can hear the calls of macaws and monkeys and occasionally we see an anteater. Every tree looks different - it is amazing how many different varieties there are. One or two trees bear fruits or nuts. Each tree is bound to the next by vines - some as thick as a man's arm.

At last we come to a clearing. As we step out from under the trees, the heat of the Sun hits us. This is no natural clearing. For nearly half a kilometre in each direction we can see the fallen and burnt trunks of trees. Crops are growing among the ashes. We head back into the forest to find the village belonging to the farmers who have cleared this path of forest. Their main crop is cassava, a vegetable that is poisonous until it has been pounded, washed and cooked.

The village is a small huddle of wooden huts. The people have few possessions but they have a great knowledge of their forest. Each year or two they must clear a large area of the forest to grow their crops. The soil soon loses its fertility and the farmers move on to another patch. They leave each area for at least 20 years. In that time the trees can grow again and the forest fills in the clearing.

It takes a lot of effort for the small group of farmers to bring down the trees. Why do they do it we ask? Why not live on the food the forest can provide? That is a problem they tell us. The supplies of fruit and nuts and edible animals are very spread out. It would take far too long for hunters and collectors to find enough food to supply the village.

But the farmers have another problem. There are more people and they need more food. To grow enough crops they have had to reduce the time the forest has to recover. But when they chop down the trees after just ten years, the soil is poor and the crops do not grow well.

When the loggers look into the rain forest they can see the money they can make from it. Some of the trees are valuable. They are hard woods that people all over the world want for buildings and furniture. Thanks to a new road built by the government, the loggers can get their vehicles and machines into a

fresh patch of forest. First the trees that are due to be felled are marked. Then the tree fellers move in and drag the huge trees to the ground. Other trees fall too, pulled down by the vines that join the trees together. Next the tractors arrive to haul the trees away. They destroy every other plant in their path and leave a barren track. Tree after tree is loaded onto the Lorries that rumble day and night along the road. The loggers move on leaving destruction behind them.

### THE SOLUTION

The population of the world is still growing. We need more food and we need resources for homes and furniture. Wood is an excellent material to make things out of and of course we still use lots of paper. How can we supply all the wood that is needed, give farmers land to grow food and still keep our forests? The answer is sustainable management of forests. Away from the tropics in the developed countries of Canada, Scandinavia and Australia, forests are being replanted to provide wood for the future. Wild forests are protected. At least that is the theory.

In the tropics native peoples could be encouraged to use farming methods that leave most of the trees standing. Logging companies could take more care to remove only a few trees from each area and to avoid damaging the rest. Plantation owners could use crop rotation to make sure that nutrients aren't sucked out of the soil.

All these ideas mean that people must take more care of their forests. The rest of us living in cities and towns must make sure that our lifestyle does not encourage the businesses that are only concerned with making money.

### WHAT DO FOREST DO FOR US?

Trees do a lot for us, even if they are left just where they are.

- The roots hold onto the soil and stop it being washed or blown away.
- The trees hold onto water. Where forests have been cleared there have been flash floods.
- Forests control the weather. Water vapour evaporates from their leaves cooling the air. In tropical areas where forests have been cleared the climate has got hotter and drier.
- A lot of the oxygen we breathe comes from forests. Trees take in carbon dioxide and convert it into wood. Burning forests releases the carbon dioxide into the air and increases global warming.
- Tropical forests have more biodiversity than cleared areas. This means that there are more species of living things in forests. Many of these creatures could be useful us.
- Forests are a source of food. Although fruit and nut bearing trees are spread out they could be harvested.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What is meant by 'sustainable management of forests? How can we use forests and keep them?
- 2 Look around your home. What do you have that
  - a) is made of wood
  - b) is a crop grown in a tropical country, e.g. Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia?