

## David Suzuki: Forests count in our fight against climate change

By David Suzuki and Faisal Moola

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In 1992, I attended an event that filled me with hope. Canada and the rest of the world had just signed a climate change treaty at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. I remember being optimistic that the world could come together to fight the greatest threat to our planet and our own survival. We had done it before in overcoming other threats, like defeating Nazism in Europe and beating back horrific diseases like polio that once maimed and killed tens of thousands of people each year.

When Canada signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) treaty, we had not yet begun to experience the full consequences of climate change. There were no news reports of starving polar bears in the Arctic, the mountain pine beetle had not yet turned B.C.'s forests crimson, and we weren't facing a rapid increase in infectious diseases, like Lyme disease, that are exacerbated by warming temperatures.

The effects of climate change are now affecting people and places all over the planet, from the most remote tropical rainforest to the urban parks where many of our kids play. And scientists tell us that some changes, like melting sea ice in the Arctic, are happening much faster than any computer model had predicted.

Though the 1992 UNFCCC treaty set no mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions and contained no enforcement provisions (these would come later in the Kyoto Protocol and, we hope, in a forthcoming climate treaty that will replace it), it did set an ambitious science-based goal: to stabilize greenhouse gases in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent the effects of dangerous climate change.

Scientists say we can only achieve this goal if we radically reduce all major sources of heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions. While much of the debate and action has focused on curbing emissions from burning fossil fuels such as oil, coal, and gas, the destruction of our forests, wetlands, grasslands, and peatlands is responsible for about one quarter of all other

emissions into the atmosphere. That's higher than emissions from cars, trucks, boats, and planes together.

In Canada and throughout the world, forests are being rapidly cleared for agriculture and oil and gas development and are being destructively mined and logged. When forest soils are disturbed and trees are burned or cut down for wood and paper products, much of the carbon stored in their biomass is released back into the atmosphere as heat-trapping carbon dioxide, although some carbon can remain stored in longer-lived forest products, like wood used to make furniture or homes.

Thus the destruction of forests and other ecosystems is not only a driver of extinction of species, such as boreal caribou, but is a driver of global warming as well.

We need to adopt a carbon stewardship approach to how we use our forests and the goods and services we take from them.

For some scientists, carbon stewardship means setting aside at least half of all remaining intact forests as protected areas, particularly carbon-rich forests like old-growth temperate rainforests in B.C. and the boreal in Canada's north, where wildlife like caribou feed, breed, and roam. Protecting intact forests also promotes ecological resiliency so that species and ecosystems can cope with and adapt to the effects of climate change.

That doesn't mean that the logging companies should be allowed to trash the other 50 percent. Forests that we do manage for wood and paper production should be logged according to the highest standards of ecosystem-based management—without clear-cutting and with adequate protection for wildlife habitat like caribou as well as sensitive areas like wetlands.

In December, the world's nations will meet at the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen to negotiate a new strong and fair climate change agreement that will continue and strengthen the Kyoto Protocol. Scientists tell us that to avoid dangerous climate change governments must agree to deep reductions in greenhouse gases, including carbon emissions from the destruction of our forests, wetlands, and other ecosystems. We can achieve this by agreeing to protect our intact forests, taking full responsibility for

emissions from logging and other land-use activities, and helping developing nations reduce deforestation.

Let's use our forests in a truly sustainable way that is better for nature, better for the climate, and ultimately better for our own health and well-being.

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