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Forests, Science and People

Press Release

International Union of Forest Research Organizations

Forests to fall victim to “the Humpty Dumpty effect”: leading scientists reveal a precautionary tale

- A collapsed society and economy cannot be ‘put back together again’, scientists warn in the International Union of Forest Research Organizations’ latest report.
- The report explores for the first time, the role of forests in upholding and enhancing the resilience of social and economic systems.
- Science shows that regardless of proximity to forests, global economies and societies rely on forests in deeply complex ways, and political shifts can leave forest socio-ecological systems extremely vulnerable.
- ‘Business as usual’ policy making will fail. Scientists are recommending proactive, bottom-up, long-term approaches over short-term economic gain, to preserve the foundations of society.

Villagers meet under a mango tree in Torem village, Burkina Faso
© Tree Aid

Vienna, 5 June 2025 - A global report on the role of forests in providing economic and social resilience, has revealed that the rapid pursuit of economic growth, coupled with a critical misunderstanding of how forests can preserve resilience, has set a path for undoable destruction. Researchers have dubbed this “The Humpty Dumpty Effect”.

Research shows that forests are being pushed to the brink of collapse, which could send ripple effects across the globe, destabilising societies and economies, and just as the nursery rhyme warns, collapsed systems cannot be ‘put back together again’.

Launched today on World Environment Day, this report is the first of its kind. Leading scientists convened by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) to explore, for the first time globally, how forests contribute to social and economic resilience in the face of disturbance and change, and how societies can, in turn, support and steward resilient forest systems. Scientists are calling on policymakers to abandon business as usual and recognise that forests are not isolated systems but instead exist as social-ecological systems (SES).

In this vein, the world’s forests are not immune to global regime shifts. As political polarisation grows, climate change is becoming deprioritised, and markets are shifting

in response, and changing the way in which we rely on, manage, and protect our forests. Scientists warn that by failing to uphold forest resilience, we are pushing them beyond the point of recovery.

Dr. Craig Allen, Resilience Scientist and Professor at the School of Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln said: "It's not just the trees that fall - it's a whole web of relationships between species, soil, water, and people that unravels. Once disrupted, these relationships can't simply be 'replanted'. We need proactive resilience building now, rooted in science, justice and long-term thinking."

Indigenous Peoples and local communities have long been championed as the custodians of our forests, often disproportionately impacted by the onset of climate change. Whilst this is true, the report highlights that policymakers underestimate the growing ways in which our world is interconnected.

Dr. Nelson Grima, Coordinator of the Science-Policy Programme at IUFRO said: "When we destabilise forests, the impacts can be felt across all regions and economies. Forests are everyone's business - not just those living nearby. Every person relies on forests to either regulate their climate, sequester carbon, or to alleviate poverty, ensure food and clean water or to keep economies stable. It's not about proximity."

IUFRO's report recommends how policymakers can improve and better understand how forests uphold social and economic resilience in ways that acknowledge the world's interconnectedness. Economic prosperity cannot be considered synonymous with improving the resilience of social-ecological systems, in fact, it's often quite the contrary.

On World Environment Day IUFRO is calling on policymakers and decision-makers to transform their understanding of the challenges and solutions our forests face, and to move from reactive, short-term, siloed decision-making to long-term, proactive, systems-based approaches that treat forests as part of our social, economic, and environmental fabric.

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Notes To Editors:

Find the report and related policy brief: here
Direct link to report
More details, photos and a list of authors: here

The report launch event details are listed below:
Online roundtable: Findings from a New Global Assessment on Forests for Social and Economic Resilience
World Environment Day, **05th June 2025, 2pm CEST** (online)
Agenda
Hosted by IUFRO Science-Policy Programme
Registration

About the report:

This report, titled "Forests as pillars of social and economic resilience", presents the results of the ninth global scientific assessment undertaken within the framework of the IUFRO-led Global Forest Expert Panels (GFEP) Initiative of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). All GFEP assessments are prepared by internationally recognised scientists from varied professional backgrounds and geographical contexts. The publications are presented to stakeholders across relevant international policy fora to support more coherent policies on the role of forests in addressing the environmental, social, and economic challenges reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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About the Science-Policy Programme (SciPol) of IUFRO:

The Science-Policy Programme (SciPol) of IUFRO provides a mechanism for effectively mobilizing scientific expertise and information to equip governments and intergovernmental processes with solid knowledge for making decisions that affect forests, trees, and land use regionally and globally.

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About the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO):

The International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) is a non-profit and non-governmental worldwide network of 15,000 forest scientists across 120 countries, who work together to enhance the understanding of the ecological, economic and social aspects of forests and trees. Founded in 1892, IUFRO is headquartered in Vienna, Austria.

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