Extinctions Continue Long After Deforestation

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Species extinction is likely to occur for up to a century after a tropical forest has been logged, according to recent studies.

"We should not be lulled into a false sense of security when we see that many species have survived habitat loss in the short term," says Guy Cowlishaw of the Zoological Society of London. "Many are not actually viable in the long term. These might be considered 'living dead'."

Cowlishaw determined how many primate species are likely to become extinct in African forests based on the relationship between species number and habitat size, and the extent of deforestation in African countries.

His results suggest that the amount of deforestation so far has left Africa with a sizeable extinction debt. For example, without losing any additional forest, six countries (Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Kenya and Nigeria) could lose more than a third of their primate species within the next few decades. But actual extinction of species could be much higher due to the fact that forest loss is expected to proceed at an alarming rate. By the year 2040, scientists predict West Africa will lose 70 percent of its remaining forest and in East Africa the loss could be as high as 95 percent.

It's critically important that we protect as much as possible of what is left of Africa's tropical forests, said Cowlishaw. In a similar study, Thomas Brooks, a biologist from the University of Arkansas, studied the extinction of bird species in five fragments of the Kakamega region, Kenya's only rain forest. His study asks how long the lag time really is between deforestation and species extinction.

Brooks and his colleagues looked at how fast birds became extinct as Kakamega experienced increasing forest fragmentation over the last century. They found that within 50 years of isolation, 2,500-acre fragments of Kakamega Forest should lose half the bird species likely to go extinct. **"Even a century after a forest has been fragmented, it may still be suffering from bird extinctions," Brooks said.**

"Our results provide both encouragement and warning," Brooks said.

"The good news is we have a brief breathing space. Even after tropical forests are fragmented, there is still some time to adopt conservation measures to prevent the extinction of their species. The flip side of this is bad news, though: there is no room for complacency."

Brooks suggests reforestation and establishing parks in fragmented rain forest regions in order to reverse the extinction trend.

Reports on both researchers' studies were published in the October issue of Conservation Biology.

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