

Old-growth forests continue to disappear despite EU protection commitments

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Old-growth forests are of exceptional importance for biodiversity and climate protection in Europe, but they are increasingly rare. Despite the European Union's (EU) pledge in its Biodiversity Strategy for 2030,

legislation to protect old-growth remnants still has not been implemented in many member states. Old-growth forest loss continues at alarming rates.

A new commentary in *Science* argues that comprehensive mapping of [old-growth forests](#)—and an immediate moratorium on logging where these are most likely to occur—is urgently required to stop the loss of these unique forests.

Old-growth forests are under high and rising pressure in many parts of the world, including Europe. In most EU countries, very few old-growth forests remain, and they are typically small and isolated. While the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 mandates their legal protection, an international team of scientists warns in a new commentary published in *Science* that despite this, old-growth forests loss continues unabated.

"These forests are critical for [biodiversity conservation](#); many [endangered species](#) depend on them, including wolves, lynx and bears, and a myriad of beetles and fungi," explains Dr. Mikoláš from the Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, the lead author of the article. "They also store vast amounts of carbon, so they offer a natural solution against climate change. Despite their importance, we are currently failing to protect this natural heritage. Urgent action is required to better protect old-growth forests before it is too late."

According to the researchers, a key barrier to better old-growth forests conservation is incomplete maps of where these forests are found. "We urgently need a systematic mapping effort to generate the basis for the sufficient protection of old-growth forests," co-author Prof. Tobias Kuemmerle from Humboldt-University Berlin in Germany, argues. "Without this, old-growth forests might be logged before they are identified. Or these forests might be logged because they are locally still relatively widespread, and their outstanding conservation value from a

European perspective is overlooked."

While their remoteness often protected old-growth forests in the past, this has changed recently. "Logging old-growth forests offers higher profit for [forest](#) owners than to protect them," adds Dr. Miroslav Svoboda, a co-author from the Czech University of Life Sciences. "Timber prices are high and stricter protection is on the horizon. At the same time, owners are currently not sufficiently compensated for conserving their forests. All this translates into a high incentive to log old-growth forests now, before regulation tightens." The authors note that this is already happening in many countries, including Romania and Sweden.

"The last remaining old-growth forests are disappearing before our very eyes, and this is in strong contradiction with the EU biodiversity targets," Tobias Kuemmerle explains. "But we have all the tools to halt this loss." According to the researchers, what is needed is equitable financial compensation for forest owners when they manage their old-growth forests sustainably so that they keep their ecological value. The EU should immediately adopt a logging moratorium on areas potentially containing old-growth forests, so that they do not disappear before they are even identified. Finally, there must be a binding requirement that member states include old-growth forest protection in their national strategies.

"Successful examples exist," says co-author Prof. Gianluca Piovesan from University of Tuscia, Viterbo, Italy. "Eighteen countries in Europe have been collaborating for years now to strictly protect over 100,000 hectares of old-growth beech forests." This effort has led to the creation of the world's largest UNESCO heritage site. "The time to act is now," adds Dr. Mikoláš. "We must take the necessary steps to safeguard this irreplaceable natural heritage for future generations."

More information: Martin Mikoláš et al, Protect old-growth forests in Europe now, *Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1126/science.adh2303](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adh2303)

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