

Southern Forests

Southern forests are the most biologically diverse in North America and in many cases, the world. Unfortunately, the unique challenge that we face in the South is that 90% of the forests are privately owned and lack any legal protections.

Southern forests contain some of the most biologically rich ecosystems in North America. From the Gulf Coast, Ozark Mountains and Southern Appalachians to the pine woods and swamps of the East Coast, Southern forests house an abundance of plant and animal diversity and pristine watersheds. Many of the region's plant and aquatic species can be found nowhere else in the world.

Southern forests contain:

- The highest concentration of tree species diversity in North America;
- The highest concentration of aquatic diversity in the continental United States, including the richest temperate freshwater ecosystem in the world; and
- The highest concentration of wetlands in the U.S., 75% of which are forested.

"Nowhere in America is there a greater variety of native plant communities, native plant species, or rare and endemic plants"

USFS 2002

There are 14 forest community types in the South that have been reduced to less than 2% of their original range. Additionally, there are 25 forest community types that are at less than 15% of their original range and another 11 at less than 30% of their original range.

[Click here for a few examples.](#)

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“Approximately 90% of the land in the South is privately owned. The protection and management of species habitat can no longer be solely relegated to public land.” USFS 2002

Threats to Southern Forests

The unique forests of the South are under increasing pressure from the wood products industry as well as urban sprawl and development. The Southern Forest Resource Assessment (SFRA) was

initiated in 1999 by the US Forest Service (USFS) in response to growing public concern about accelerated clearcutting and conversion of the South's forests to plantations in the wake of an expanding paper industry. The two-year study, released in 2002 highlights the threats posed to the South's forests by sprawl as well as industrial forestry and the paper industry. The loss of forests to sprawl magnifies the impacts of the paper industry's unsustainable forestry practices as remaining natural forests become even more important for sustaining water quality, wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, and recreation as well as value-added, locally owned wood products industries. The report's picture of the current status of the Southern forest verifies that it is currently in a state of decline from the combined effects of urban sprawl and the wood products industry. [Click here for our summary of the SFRA.](#)

[Click here to read the Southern Forest Resource Assessment](#)

An expanding Wood Products Industry

According to the USFS, the South produces more timber than any other single country in the world, and it is projected to be the dominant producing region for many decades to come. The dominant share of the region's timber is going to pulp and paper production. The South is currently the largest paper-producing region in the world, producing approximately 15% of the world's paper supply. This industry is driving the destruction of our forests through industrial-scale clearcutting and the conversion of forests and wetlands to intensively managed tree plantations.

As of 2002:

- Approximately 6 million acres of the South's forests are logged every year largely to make paper
- Removals of softwoods (pines) exceed growth throughout the region
- Removals of all species exceed growth on industry land in the region
- Logging is expected to increase 50% by the year 2040
- Removals of hardwoods are projected to exceed growth by 2025

In addition to clear-cutting, diverse natural forests in the region are being converted to single-species tree plantations that are sprayed with toxic fertilizers and herbicides.

As of 2002:

- 40% of the region's native pine forests have already been converted to intensively-managed single-species plantations
- There are currently 32 million acres of plantations in the region
- Seventy-five percent of the plantations established in the last two decades in the South were established at the expense of natural forests
- According to the US Fish & Wildlife Service the conversion of bottomland wetland forests to plantations is the leading cause of freshwater forested wetland loss in the South
- The use of chemical fertilizers on tree plantations in the South exceeds the sum of all the fertilizers used on tree plantations in the rest of the world combined.
- Chemical spraying in plantations across the South increased by 800% from 1990 -1999.
- The area of forests in plantations is expected to nearly double by the year 2040 to occupy one in every four acres.