

OPEN LETTER

Strong commitment of the European Union to old-growth forests is needed ahead of COP16 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity

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to: European Commission DG Environment and DG Agriculture
European Parliament Environmental Committee and delegation to CBD COP16
Committee of Region delegation to CBD COP16
Hungarian EC Presidency representatives including the Minister of Agriculture

Ahead of the 16th Conference of Parties (COP16) of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), we, the undersigned scientists, urge the decision makers of the European Union¹ to continue the implementation of the EU Green Deal. Particular attention is needed to fulfill the commitments made towards improving the status and condition of forests in the EU through urgent protection of primary and old-growth forests, restoring characteristics of naturalness of forest ecosystems, and improving the monitoring of forests across the EU. By this, the European Union will make a strong contribution to progress towards forest conservation goals within the global CBD process.

Forest ecosystems benefit all of society through supplying a wide range of ecosystem services. Ecosystems with a high degree of naturalness provide resilience and capacity for adaptation as the climate and environment change, and thus a greater ability to continue supplying these services. Just as important or more important than their provision of timber and other products, forest ecosystems, and especially primary forests, provide carbon storage (as recognised also in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030); regulate and filter the water supply; regulate and buffer microclimate; provide habitat for an overwhelming number of threatened species, including pollinators; and provide nature-based recreation and human wellbeing.

The CBD's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), to which the EU and its Member States committed themselves, aims to catalyze, enable and galvanize urgent and transformative action by Governments, and subnational and local authorities, with the involvement of all of society. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 defined various tools linked to our forests that would enable Member States to fully implement the objectives of the GBF in a balanced manner.

However, forests in the EU are still in a terrible condition. According to the 2020 EEA State of Nature in the EU report, only 14% of forest habitats in the Natura 2000 network - the EU's flagship protected area network intended to "ensure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats," - exhibit favourable conservation status. Hence the imperative of implementing the EU's Biodiversity Strategy 2030 that aims to implement strict protection of all primary and old growth forests. However, this only amounts to 4% of Europe's forests. More is needed.

¹ including the European Parliament, the European Commission and the EU Council

The Glasgow Leaders Declaration on Forests² (GLDF) recognised that in order to deliver the objectives of the UNFCCC and CBD the conservation and restoration of forest ecosystems are necessary. The high level representatives of the EU and its Member States as signatories of the GLDF committed “to working collectively to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030”.

What will help ensure that forests, including primary forests, are strengthened to endure against the impacts of climate change and exploitation? We believe it is management and policies that embody the following guiding principles:

1. Climate mitigation and biodiversity values are intertwined.
2. Forest ecosystems as natural habitats are self-sustaining, and do not require active human intervention and timber provisioning.
3. The higher a forest’s level of ecosystem integrity, the greater its resilience, and resistance to disturbances, and the greater its climate mitigation benefit and adaptive capacity.

In order to guarantee the implementation of the CBD GBF, we call on the European Union to include the following in its position for the COP16 in Cali:

- The EU recognises that the intertwined biodiversity and climate crises requires harmonised action and specifically recognise the importance of primary and old-growth forests in this process.
- With reference to the GLDF, the EU guarantees to swiftly implement the EU Nature Restoration Law, which helps the Member States to deliver GBF Target 2 for 2030 (Restore 30% of all Degraded Ecosystems).
- The EU ensures that by 2030 its degraded forest ecosystems are under effective restoration to improve naturalness and ecological integrity, in order to enhance biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, ecological integrity and connectivity.
- By safeguarding a fast adoption and solid implementation of the EU Regulation on Deforestation Free Products, the EU will make its due contribution to the reduction of pressures on forests worldwide.

As important next steps in the course of implementing the CBD GBF, the EU must promote that:

- A legal framework is established in favour of the conservation and restoration of primary and old-growth forests worldwide, with concrete actions to set the protection of primary, old-growth, and mature forests against logging in Europe.
- The carbon stock in forests across the globe is increased through letting secondary forests grow, which would also contribute to improving their naturalness.
- Policy actions are implemented to decrease the pressure on forests in the EU and beyond from demands for wood products, with particular attention to removing primary woody biomass as an eligible renewable energy source.
- In line with Target 19 of the CBD GBF, enough resources are mobilised for forest protection and rewilding as a mutual action to implement CBD and UNFCCC.

Sincerely yours,

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