



# Protecting our 'Green Lungs'

**WEEKEND REFLECTIONS**

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**C**an you imagine what the world will be like without trees and plants? If only animals and humans existed on Earth, it would literally be a barren land without trees. But it would be wrong to say that trees only make our world a beautiful place. They do far more than that.

## Enormous benefits

Trees give off oxygen that we need to breathe. It has been shown that one acre of forest absorbs six tons of carbon dioxide and puts out four tons of oxygen. Trees reduce the amount of storm water runoff, which reduces erosion and pollution in our waterways and may reduce the effects of flooding. Many species of wildlife depend on trees for habitat. Trees provide food, protection, and homes for many birds and mammals. Trees reduce the urban heat island effect through evaporative cooling and reducing the amount of sunlight that reaches parking lots and buildings. This is especially true in areas with large impervious surfaces.

Trees improve our air quality by filtering harmful dust and pollutants such as ozone, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide from the air we breathe. Access to trees, green spaces, and parks promotes greater physical activity, and reduces stress, while improving the quality of life in our cities and towns. Studies show that urban vegetation slows heartbeats, lowers blood pressure, and relaxes brain wave patterns. A tree is a natural air conditioner. The evaporation from a single tree can produce the cooling effect of ten room-size, residential air conditioners operating 20 hours a day. Trees absorb and block sound, reducing noise pollution by as much as 40 percent.

Trees provide beauty and help people feel serene, peaceful, restful, and tranquil. Trees also bring natural elements and wildlife habitats into urban surroundings, all of which increase the quality of life for residents in the community. Indeed, as described above, the benefits of trees extend far beyond the beauty they bring to the landscape around us.

Hence, it is important for everyone to protect trees and plants, without which we would even not be alive. Trees are high-value assets. As humans evolved and migrated around the globe, trees also provided additional necessities such as energy, shelter, medicine, tools, and transportation in the form of wheels and ships. Unfortunately, many trees are cut down in the name of development. Many cities' forests and trees are demolished for house constructions and for constructing townships. Trees are also cut, burnt for new developments, road widening, and transport projects. Even Colombo, which was once known as the Garden City of Asia and classified as a "forest" has lost many of its trees, leaving the Vihara Maha Devi Park as the only urban oasis.

## Remedies

But the biggest threat to the world's forest cover is large-scale deforestation. Just last month, more than 100 countries signed on to an ambitious plan to halt deforestation by 2030 and pledged billions of dollars to the effort. This is not even the first time that this was done. In 2014 too, more than 200 governments, companies and civil society organi-

sations signed the New York Declaration of Forests, which called for halving the rate of deforestation by 2020 and halting it by 2030. Although world leaders lauded the move, climate activists say they've heard that promise before and that past efforts have come up short — the world is still losing massive numbers of trees each year.

According to Global Forest Watch, the world lost 411 million hectares of forest between 2001 and 2020. That's roughly half the size of the United States and equivalent to 10 percent of global tree cover. In 2020, the world lost a near-record 25.8 million hectares — almost double the amount in 2001. The Amazon is the world's largest rainforest and arguably the most closely watched harbinger of deforestation.

The rainforest is 17 percent deforested and losses are especially pronounced in Brazil, which lost some 1.7 million hectares



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of rainforest in 2020 alone. Indonesia and Malaysia are the leaders in Asia when it comes to deforestation. And when the trees are cut, or are either burned or decay, they release extra carbon into the atmosphere. According to the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, about 23 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture, forestry and other land uses.

## New trees

It is obvious that we have to stop deforestation at the present rates and moreover, plant new trees to offset that loss. One starting point is to find alternative sources for things that we make from trees, such as furniture and paper. Today, all these can be manufactured synthetically and materials such as paper can be recycled almost endlessly. We can also reduce our own consumption of tree and timber products - instead of buying that hardcover book you just ordered online, why not download it to your tablet or phone instead? That will help save some trees.

The other option is planting trees. Planting a tree is a very simple act that anyone can do. All you need is a sapling and a bit of ground. Add water and fertiliser and you are all set. Remember, some plants can also be grown in pots and in indoor settings. The Government has commenced a programme under the theme "Husma Dena Thuru" (Trees Giving Life) which aims to plant a million trees and bring Sri Lanka's forest cover to at least 30 percent by 2030. Apart from the above meaning, this Sinhala term has another subtle meaning - Husma Dena Thuru can also mean that we could live only as long as trees give us breaths, literally.

However, some experts said that planting trees in our gardens, while praiseworthy, does not really make up for the large-scale felling of trees in our forests.

Therefore, the best option really is reforestation at the source of deforestation, perhaps on the same scale. This has also given rise to the idea of "sustainable forests", whereby some trees can be cut down for various uses once they reach maturity, to be replaced by new trees. Hence the global call for planting one trillion trees, that will allow a certain quota for sustainable use while ensuring that the planet's 'green lung' remains essentially intact.



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