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What's in a name? The implications of forest definitions for assessing their degradation and recovery

Co-authors: Robin L. Chazdon, PARTNERS, University of Connecticut; Pedro H. S. Brancalion, Departamento de Ciências Florestais da Universidade de São Paulo; Aoife Bennett-Curry, Oxford University; Kathleen Buckingham, WRI; Chetan Kumar, University of Cambridge; Lars Laestadius, WRI; Julian Moll-Rocek, University of Connecticut; Ima Célia G.Vieira, Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi

Forest-based livelihoods require a synergistic relationship between two key elements – people, and forests. But the benefits that people derive from forests can vary dramatically depending on the type of forest available – its age, growth rates, and species therein. Current forest definitions used in global policies and forest assessments are based on historical, western forest management objectives and paradigms intended to measure timber yields or forest extent. But these forest definitions are insensitive to many aspects of forest quality, combining disparate categories of arboreal vegetation into a single entity despite their diverse historical origins, future trajectories, and ecological and social properties. Consequently, losses of natural forest with high levels of biodiversity and multiple traditional uses are masked by increases in industrial, monoculture plantations. These definitions also exclude from forest inventories small forest fragments, early stages of natural regeneration, and young restoration plantings – forests that are important for maintaining rural livelihoods, traditional practices, and ecological integrity across landscapes. In this study we examine forest definitions from a historical perspective, and show the impact of using these definitions on forest assessments in a number of different contexts. We demonstrate that the scope of how forests are conceptualized, defined, assessed, and valued has broadened, as new objectives and concerns have been added to the long-entrenched timber production paradigm. We provide a framework for viewing forests that incorporates their social and ecological legacies, trajectories, and management objectives. Ultimately, we show that these new approaches that define forests within a dynamic spatial and temporal landscape and socio-political context are needed to appropriately monitor forest degradation and recovery, track progress in meeting conservation and restoration targets, and design forest policies that meet the needs of the rural people who depend on them.