

Have you ever seen the woods in early spring? Before the heat and the heavy leaves? When the moss is all lush and green, when there's nothing in the way of the clear blue sky, when only the smallest and sweetest birdsong floats by? It feels absolutely magical. Forests have the potential to solve all our problems- if we don't destroy them first.

I always feel more at peace after a walk in the woods- and there's science to back it up. Studies showed changes in physiology- such as lowered stress or fewer negative thoughts- in participants who spent time in nature. And it's not just humans who benefit; animals and plants do better in old-growth forests without human disturbance. In a world where extinction is a constant threat due to habitat loss, safe havens are more important than ever.

In 2022, we lost over 16 million acres of forest. Not just in the Amazon, but worldwide. It will take decades for that much forest to regrow, and that assumes we stop causing such damage. Just achieving a neutral effect might take years we don't have.

Besides the benefits for the individual, forests provide wide benefits for the world. Cutting down forests releases 1.6 billion metric tons of carbon into the atmosphere every year; it's a significant contributor to climate-warming carbon emissions. Forests purify air and water, which is especially important because of the pollution humans contribute. They are vital to many indigenous cultures, who have protected and supported forests across the globe for centuries. About 20% of the global population has livelihoods dependent on forests.

And yet, despite all of this, environmental issues and deforestation are treated as controversial political points. Our government argues over how much protection should be given, over how to achieve it, and over whether it should be given at all. The most forested areas of the United States currently stand largely unprotected by federal laws and regulations. If the role of the government is to protect its people, it must start with the forests.

The carelessness individuals and governments treat forests is terrifying. People seem more concerned with the short-term economy, with eating their favorite peanut butter, or with making money and maintaining political control than our survival. We can't close our eyes to the damage our forests have suffered. We can't turn away from the problems we have caused. Our forests can't take it anymore.

Our course of action is clear. We have to start caring, start fighting, and start talking about our forests. They are beautiful and vital. They keep us safe and living and growing- we need to start returning the favor. And more than anything else, we need to keep walking in the woods. When was the last time you took a stroll in the forest? Can you remember the smell of fresh earth? Get out there and touch some grass. Understand that we are so, so small in this beautiful world. There is so much beauty left to protect.