UN report: As the world’s forests continue to shrink, urgent action is needed to safeguard their biodiversity

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Urgent action is needed to safeguard the biodiversity of the world’s forests amid alarming rates of deforestation and degradation, according to the latest edition of The State of the World’s Forests released last week.

Published on the International Day for Biological Diversity (22 May), the report shows that the conservation of the world’s biodiversity is utterly dependent on the way in which we interact with and use the world’s forests.

The report was produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in partnership, for the first time, with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and technical input from the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC).

It highlights that some 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through conversion to other land uses since 1990, although the rate of deforestation has decreased over the past three decades.

The COVID-19 crisis has thrown into sharp focus the importance of conserving and sustainably using nature, recognizing that people’s health is linked to ecosystem health.

FAO’s Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020, noted in the report, found that despite a slowing of the rate of deforestation in the last decade, some 10 million hectares are still being lost each year through conversion to agriculture and other land uses.

“Deforestation and forest degradation continue to take place at alarming rates, which contributes significantly to the ongoing loss of biodiversity,” FAO Director-General, QU Dongyu, and the Executive Director of UNEP, Inger Andersen, said in the foreword.

The report presents a comprehensive overview of forest biodiversity, including world maps revealing where forests still hold rich communities of fauna and flora, such as the northern
Andes and parts of the Congo Basin, and where they have been lost.

The report notes that the Aichi Biodiversity Target to protect at least 17 percent of the Earth’s terrestrial areas by 2020 has been achieved for forests, although progress is still required to ensure the representativeness and effectiveness of such protection.

A study conducted by UNEP-WCMC for this report shows that the largest increase in protected forest areas occurred in broadleaved evergreen forests – such as those typically found in the tropics. Furthermore, over 30 percent of all tropical rainforests, subtropical dry forests and temperate oceanic forests are now located within protected areas.