



China's bitter-sweet success at halting forest loss

Copyright: Adam Dean / Panos

Speed read

- Satellite images show tree cover in China is on the rise
- Low resolution could hide even greater success of afforestation policy
- But unsustainable wood imports mean the problem may just be shifting elsewhere

China's attempts to reverse decades of deforestation (<http://www.scidev.net/global/agriculture/forestry/>) are looking hopeful, scientists say, but the problem may simply be moving abroad.

Analysis of satellite imagery, published in Science Advances last week (<http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/2/3/e1500965>), shows that between 2000 and 2010 tree cover increased by 20 per cent or more in roughly 1.6 per cent of China's territories, while less than 0.5 per cent have seen tree loss.

The authors from Michigan State University (MSU) measured these changes against economic, geographical and social policies (<http://www.scidev.net/global/governance/policy/>). They suggest much of the credit is owed to the Chinese government's Natural Forest Conservation Program implemented in 1998.

The policy introduced logging bans, and reforestation laws and incentivised alternative employment for forest workers. But despite the domestic success of the policy, the paper's co-author Jianguo Liu, director of MSU's Center for Systems Integration, says the country might simply be

farming (<http://www.scidev.net/global/agriculture/farming/>) out the problem.

"While China has largely stopped cutting down trees within its borders, it is still importing a lot of forest products from other countries, which could be causing deforestation there," he says.

You might also like

- Conservation plans that sacrifice people could fail ([//global/forestry/feature/conservation-plans-sacrifice-forests-indigenous.html?_src=related_articles](http://global/forestry/feature/conservation-plans-sacrifice-forests-indigenous.html?_src=related_articles))
- Overhunting chops tropical forest carbon storage ([//global/forestry/news/overhunting-tropical-forest-carbon-storage.html?_src=related_articles](http://global/forestry/news/overhunting-tropical-forest-carbon-storage.html?_src=related_articles))
- Indigenous people keep carbon locked in forests ([//global/indigenous/news/indigenous-people-carbon-locked-forests.html?_src=related_articles](http://global/indigenous/news/indigenous-people-carbon-locked-forests.html?_src=related_articles))

The authors also say their estimates are conservative because the imagery from NASA's Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer satellite is not granular enough to pick up reforestation of small parcels of land, meaning some efforts may have been missed.

According to Tim Forsyth, a professor of environment and development at the London School of Economics, the paper's focus on tree cover offers only "a very reduced vision of forests", because it does not take account of the quality of the forest or its impact on biodiversity (<http://www.scidev.net/global/environment/biodiversity/>) or livelihoods.

WWF's director of forests Rod Taylor says the news is positive for China, but agrees this kind of satellite imagery analysis "can miss lots of shades of grey". For instance, it can't differentiate single species plantations from rainforest or identify selective logging of high-value wood in tropical forests, he says.

Restriction of domestic wood supply is also likely to increase imports from other countries with worse forest governance (<http://www.scidev.net/global/governance/>), Taylor adds.

But Liu says the movement of wood in and out of China is more complicated than simple imports. "Often China is importing these products to make things like furniture that is then exported to developed countries," says Liu.

WWF's Taylor says the next step for China would be to follow the United States and Europe's lead by introducing stronger vetting of the sustainability (<http://www.scidev.net/global/governance/sustainability/>) of wood imports.

We encourage you to republish this article online and in print, it's free under our creative commons attribution license, but please follow some simple guidelines:

1. You have to credit our authors.
2. You have to credit SciDev.Net—where possible include our logo (<http://www.scidev.net/global/content/follow-us.html#Link%20to%20us>) with a link back to the original article.
3. You can simply run the first few lines of the article and then add: "Read the full article on SciDev.Net" containing a link back to the original article.
4. If you want to also take images published in this story you will need to confirm with the original source if you're licensed to use them.
5. The easiest way to get the article on your site is to embed the code below.

For more information view our media page and republishing guidelines (<http://www.scidev.net/global/content/media.html#Using%20SciDev.Net%20material>).

The full article is available here as HTML.

Press Ctrl-C to copy

```
<div class="article-wrap">
<div id="article-introduction">
<h1>China's bitter-sweet success at halting forest loss </h1>
<h4>By Edd Gent</h4>
</div>
<br />
<br />
<div id="article-body">China's attempts to reverse decades of <a
href="http://www.scidev.net/global/agriculture/forestry/">deforestation</a> are looking hopeful,
scientists say, but the problem may simply be moving abroad.<br />
<br />
Analysis of satellite imagery, <a
href="http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/2/3/e1500965">published in Science Advances
last week</a>, shows that between 2000 and 2010 tree cover increased by 20 per cent or
more in roughly 1.6 per cent of China's territories, while less than 0.5 per cent have seen tree
```

Related topics:

Forestry (</global/agriculture/forestry/>)

Conservation (</global/environment/conservation/>)

Sustainability (</global/governance/sustainability/>)

Governance (</global/governance/>)

Policy (</global/governance/policy/>)

21/03/16

Edd Gent

(</global/author.edd-gent.html>)