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World loses South Africa-sized forest area in 25 years - FAO

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The world has lost forests the size of South Africa over the past 25 years, a decline of more than 3 percent, although the rate of forest loss has significantly slowed, a report by the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said on Monday.

A growing global population and increased demand for food and land are driving deforestation, although the FAO said the rate of global forest area change has slowed by more than 50 percent since 1990.

"The biggest forest area loss occurred in the tropics, particularly in South America and Africa, although the rate of loss in those areas has decreased substantially in the past five years," FAO said.

It said the rate of loss had declined due to reduced forest conversion rates in some countries and increased forest area expansion in others.

"Countries have more knowledge of their forest resources than ever before and as a result we have a better picture of global forest change," the FAO said.

The world has just under 4 billion hectares of forests in 2015 from 4.1 billion in 1990, FAO said.

Forests give protection against climate change, as trees absorb carbon dioxide. Deforestation has been blamed for worsening soil erosion, landslides and floods.

An estimated 1.2 billion people rely on forests for their livelihood, including about 60 million indigenous people who are almost entirely dependent on them, the International Union of Forest Research Organizations said in May.

"Important challenges remain. The existence of sound policies, legislation and regulation is not always coupled with effective incentives or enforcement," the FAO said. (Reporting by Olivia Kumwenda-Mtambo, Editing by Ros Russell)

Source:<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/07/environment-forests-fao-idUSL5N11C06X20150907>