

FOREST DESTRUCTION ACCELERATES

Raymond M. Keogh

Statistics relating to deforestation in the tropics are inevitably unpleasant but they have performed a role in spurring initiatives against further destruction of the earth's forests.

In 1980 the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations informed that 11.3 million hectares of forest were being cleared per year. Put in an Irish context, this represented a denuding of an area the size of the Phoenix Park every 30 minutes.

Since 1980 a large volume of scientific and popular books and articles have been produced, outlining the causes and consequences of forest destruction. There has been a constant reminder of the forest problem in the press, on radio and television. Concern has led to the establishment, in 1985, of a forum composed of most of the agencies which provide funding to forestry in the developing world. This is known as the Tropical Forestry Action Programme. Concern about the mining of tropical timbers gave rise to an international organisation which had a slow and painful birth in the mid 1980s; its aim is to encourage tropical timber suppliers to obtain raw material from areas under sustained management. This organisation, of which Ireland is a member, operates under the title: International Tropical Timber Organisation.

In addition to the establishment of corporate bodies to redress the situation, governments have expressed concern: of special interest is the Declara-

tion on the Environment by the European Council of the EC at the Dublin Summit in June 1990 during Ireland's 'Green Presidency'. It states: *We are Gravely Concerned at the Continuing and Rapid Destruction of Tropical Forests*.

It could be assumed that the collective energy directed to redress a major global problem would, by now, begin to have an impact where it matters: in the countryside of affected nations. *Nothing Could be Further from the Truth*. FAO is undertaking a reassessment of the tropical forests using the most up-to-date technology available, including satellite remote sensing. The interim figures indicate continuing deforestation. Not alone this, the rate is accelerating. Now the annual rate of deforestation stands at 17 million hectares, equivalent to the cutting of an area the size of the Phoenix Park every 20 minutes.

Between the production of the two sets of FAO figures in 1980 and 1990 an area of 170 million hectares has disappeared; this is equivalent to 20 times the size of Ireland.

Clearly the battle for the tropical forests is being lost and lost quickly and the planet must suffer the consequences this entails. Scientists can only investigate what these consequences might be and then inform society; society must take action through its politicians. However, to redress the situation politicians cannot expect that expressions of concern will act like a magic wand; it is neces-

sary to translate these expressions into action and action, unfortunately, needs financial support.

Note of interest: Gorta (the Freedom of

Hunger Council of Ireland has reprinted a booklet entitled: "Time runs out for tropical forests". This may be obtained by writing to: Gorta, 12 Herbert Street, Dublin 2).