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Protect old-growth forests in Europe now

Old-growth forests harbor high and unique biodiversity, store vast amounts of carbon, are important for water and nutrient cycling, and constitute a unique element of natural heritage (1). In the European Union, old-growth forest protection is now mandated by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. However, almost 3 years after the strategy's adoption, stakeholders and policy makers are still discussing definitions and legislative mechanisms, while old-growth forests continue to decline at alarming rates (2–4).

Many old-growth forests are logged before their identification and protection. In Sweden, for example, unprotected boreal old-growth forests have been cut at a rate that could lead to their disappearance within the next 50 years (2). Similarly, Romania harbors up to 738,000 ha of potential old-growth forest, but more than 90% of this area lacks strict protection (5). In Romania and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, logging continues across some of the continent's few remaining large landscapes dominated by temperate old-growth forests (4). Even protected old-growth forests are often salvage logged after natural disturbances (6). Recently (20 March 2023), the European Commission has suggested guidelines to map and protect old-growth forests by the end of 2029 (7). However, these guidelines remain non-binding and not prescriptive. Given current widespread logging of old-growth stands, the EU is going to fail its 2030 goals.

Pressure on Europe's biomass-rich old-growth forests is high and rising. Timber prices have increased (8), whereas there are insufficient capacities and instruments to provide compensation that would encourage forest owners to adopt strict protection (9). Because landowners anticipate that forest protection will increase in the future, and forest monitoring is sparse, they are motivated to log as much as possible before regulation tightens.

To counteract harmful disincentives inhibiting protection, the EU should immediately implement a logging moratorium on areas potentially harboring old-growth forests, make resources available to detect old-growth forests, require member states to include old-growth protection in their national strategies, and provide equitable financial tools to ensure their effective protection (10). Exemptions from strict conservation could be considered only for stands managed by well-documented biodiversity-supportive practices. Without bold and swift action, Europe risks irreparable loss to its natural heritage.

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