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Poverty an obstacle to saving Liberia's rainforest

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By Fran Blandy

JALAY TOWN, Liberia (AFP) – Six months pregnant and with two toddlers to feed, saving the rainforest isn't top of Marita Worjiloh's list of priorities right now.

A log lies smoking amid burned, jagged tree stumps as Marita tosses seeds into the fertile soil gouged out of Liberia's jungle.

She knows this traditional method of slash-and-burn farming is decimating woodlands, but "if I had something to do to make money I won't cut the forest down, because I know it is important."

"Without a forest we would not live a good life."

So while conservationists worry about preserving rainforests -- a powerful aid against climate change -- and the biodiversity they offer, it is poverty that drives this 23-year-old.

Liberia's forest makes up 42 percent of what is left of the Upper Guinean Rainforest -- just part of a fragmented system that once covered most of West Africa but has been reduced to 12 percent of its original reach.

The people of this west African nation have relied on the forest for food, medicine and even as a refuge during two successive civil conflicts from 1989 to 2003.

Villagers also have been razing large patches for farmland and hunting the wildlife for meat.

The threat of deforestation is real with about 70 percent of the population involved in slash-and-burn farming, said Johansen Voker, the acting executive director of Liberia's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

A traditional method used worldwide, slash-and-burn involves felling trees, burning their remains for nutrient-rich ash, and planting fast-growing crops such as rice and cassava.

The land should then be allowed to regenerate but pressure from burgeoning populations often decreases this fallow period and can lead to permanent loss of forest cover.

Despite efforts to introduce more sustainable ways to live off the forest, poverty is the biggest threat to biodiversity, said Voker, leading to illegal logging, mining and burning charcoal as fuel.

"It is poverty that drives people into burning charcoal as a source of fuel and it is poverty that drives people into the kind of unsustainable farming we are talking about," he said.

"What they think about is how they can cut down a tree to produce charcoal and that charcoal will put a bowl of rice on their table."

According to a 2010 report on deforestation by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Africa lost 3.4 million hectares of forest over the last decade, the second largest net loss after South America which includes the Amazon.

Africa's forest cover is concentrated in its western and central parts, but often in countries ravaged by war that has damaged their fragile environment through abuse of natural resources and massive population displacement.

In West Africa, wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone sent more than a million refugees fleeing across their borders into forested regions of Guinea and the Ivory Coast, one of the planet's most diverse biological regions.

For Richard Sambolah, technical adviser for the British-based organisation Fauna and Flora International, Liberia's conflict led to further exploitation of the forest.

"It just intensified poverty in the country," he added, "there are no jobs and so almost 80-90 percent of the population depends on the forest."

According to Voker, Liberia's agriculture ministry is trying to aid farmers to adapt to sustainable methods such as lowland or swamp farming which can be more profitable and increase yield.

"But the farmers have to make drastic changes... to adapt to this so-called new technology," he cautioned, and might be reluctant to ditch the familiarity of traditional upland farming.

Voker said Liberia was losing up to two percent of its forest cover every year. "If it is not checked you can imagine what happens 20 years from now... the forest will be gone."

As part of the persuasion process, in a nearby village Fiona Pamplin from Fauna and Flora International has trained a troupe to dance and act out a play explaining the devastating effects of cutting down the forests.

The message is clear, if not attractive.

"I am actually quite relieved to see that people do actually understand my message but they are always asking the question: So what are we supposed to do instead?" says Pamplin.