HABITAT LOSS

In the relentless march of development, whose homes will fall victim to the expanding concrete jungle today?

By Sayesha Goel

We have lost one-third of all forests over the last 10,000 years. Habitat loss is occurring at an alarming rate.

But how exactly is habitat loss caused?

There are about 7.95 billion people living in this world, who share about 7.68 billion acres of land. This leaves approximately 1 acre of land per person, and the rest belongs to the animals. However, with the population increasing at such a high rate, global hunger is compelled to accompany it. More than 820 million people are hungry globally. Due to this, governments are compelled to convert the land owned by the animals to agricultural land in order to produce more crops so that everyone is able to consume sufficient amounts of food.
Additionally, habitat loss is also a cause of urbanization which is the act of cutting trees to build new homes. Because of it, we have to convert the forest land into residential areas.

This conversion of land might appear ordinary, but in fact looks this drastic:

In the above image, we can see that all the trees forming a dense forest have been shaved off to give a smooth field for agricultural and urbanization purposes. Just imagine the number of trees that would have been chopped to clear out the whole area. In fact, about 15 billion trees are cut down each year for similar purposes.

After the situation from the bird's eye view, let's zoom in and look at it closely. These forests are home to numerous animals. These animals bathe in the calm and crystalline water, these animals sleep on the tan and boggy soil, these animals are guarded by the sky-scraping trees just like the four firm walls in any house. They call these forests "home," it's a place where they feel safe. However, as soon as we humans come into the picture, this home is taken away from them. And why? Do you think we have the right to destroy their homes and displace them forever?

A few years ago, when I was introduced to this issue of habitat loss, I was very curious as to where these animals go after their homes have been destroyed. I researched and the answer I got was very simple, yet painful - these innocent animals not only lose their homes, but they lose their lives. This is because they die from hunger as they don't have any source of food now, or they keep lurking around the place in search of a new home but get into various accidents. Can you imagine around 260,000 such accidents take place each year?

According to recent estimates, the world is losing 137 species of plants, animals, and insects every day due to deforestation. A concerning number of 50,000 species become extinct each year. An ongoing list of animals including rhinos, leopards, tigers, mountain gorillas, elephants, etc. are currently endangered.

Imagine, in the future when you have grandchildren and they ask you what a tiger is as they haven't seen it from their own eyes, what answer would you give to them? And when they ask you where they are now,

and why they can't see them, you would have no option but to admit that these tigers are extinct because of our inhuman actions.

A sad goodbye to the beautiful wonders of nature

I am sure that all of you must have heard about the Amazon rainforest. As an ecosystem, the Amazon is one of the most biodiverse places on earth. Over 3 million species live in the rainforest, and over 2,500 tree species (or one-third of all tropical trees that exist on earth) call this rainforest their home.

Unfortunately, this beautiful forest is under great threat too. And most of you can probably guess the reason for this: us and our actions. From August 2018 to July 2019, the Amazon lost over 3,800 sq. miles of forest which is an area equivalent to over 1.8 million football fields. This signified the highest rate of deforestation in the decade. This destruction is mainly taking place in the attempt of agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, mining and logging. According to a recent report by The *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on*

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, an estimated 1 million species are currently facing extinction.

Is habitat loss actually helping us in agricultural expansion?

While we all believe that cutting trees in order to earn more land for agricultural purposes is beneficial for crop production and global hunger, that is not really the truth. The truth, however, is that our crop productivity decreases exponentially due to cutting of trees. How does cutting of trees have any relation with the crop production you might ask. But, even to my surprise, there is a relation. When we cut trees that help in stabilizing soil, it increases soil erosion that further decreases the nutrient levels in the soil. As a result of this, there is a downfall in the soil quality. When the soil quality is poor, it is hard to grow crops then as crops require a stable, and nutrition rich soil that in this case is absent due to the continuous removal of trees.

Luckily, some people have removed their blind folds and have seen the reality of this sad situation. They realized how animals lose their homes,

how nature loses its beautiful creations and how we are still losing people due to hunger even after expanding the agricultural area. seeing this ineffective solution for global hunger we have arrived at, these people have created a new model - the agroforestry model.

This model suggests a pretty simple solution - keep as many trees alive as possible. Thereby, improving the productivity on farmlands, and protecting the environment through preventing deforestation. A study says that by applying agroforestry we can rehabilitate the 35 percent of global agricultural land that is degraded, so that farmers would not have any need to deforest; this would also reduce pressures on natural forests and woodlands. Additionally, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization , agroforestry is one of the agricultural systems we should invest in, as it is able to enhance natural resources while also increasing productivity. For example, A 2014 study found that incorporating trees like acacia or *Faidherbia albida* increases the productivity of degraded land, resulting in an increase in crop yield of between 89 and 318 percent. Therefore, agroforestry is a blessing disguised as a defeat.

What is our role?

Nature has given so much to us, and we are continuously disappointing it with our cruel actions. But let's change the course now, let's give nature a chance to be proud of us. After all we are the children of nature and God, right? The least we could do is promote the agroforestry model as much as possible because it is our only hope to save these animals and their homes. Thus, let us now work towards building their homes instead of destroying them!