

How the mafia is destroying the rainforests

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The real brains behind the trade in illegal timber are elsewhere
(Image: Sipa Press/Rex Features)

It's not as glamorous as cocaine or diamonds, but the illegal logging industry has become very attractive to criminal organisations over the past decade. A new report finds that up to 90 per cent of tropical deforestation can be attributed to organised crime, which controls up to 30 per cent of the global timber trade.

For years, environmental regulators thought that illegal logging was decreasing worldwide. But they were just looking in the wrong places, says [Christian Nelleman](#), author of the [27 September report from the United Nations Environment Programme](#).

Import and export records don't tell the whole truth, he says. When the report's authors factored in the impact of sophisticated concealment techniques of the kind used by drug cartels, they discovered that rates of illegal logging have actually been rising. The criminals have become simply better at hiding their tracks. Common ploys include forging permits, hacking trade databases, bribing officials, concealing timber's true origin, and hiding illegal timber amid legal stocks.

International crime organisations that get involved in the timber trade bring considerable resources and expertise. They are attracted by both the profits and the low risk of being caught: shipping timber, unlike [ivory](#) or drugs, is not illegal.

"What we're shocked about is the sheer scale of timber that goes unaccounted for," Nelleman says. In 2008, for instance, Indonesia officially exported 18.6 million more cubic metres of wood than in 2000. This additional wood ostensibly came from legal plantations, but most of these turned out to be bogus. [Loggers simply cut down forests](#) instead.

Against this sort of enemy, what can be done? In June, Interpol established a pilot programme called [Law Enforcement Assistance for Forests \(LEAF\)](#). It will attempt to coordinate the efforts of police and intelligence agencies to fight illegal timber internationally.

"There will be more emphasis on catching the ringleaders and the mafia behind them," says Nelleman.