

# NEPCAP **SNAPSHOT**

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## **NORTH KOREA'S FOREST DILEMMA**

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# COULD FORESTS SOLVE NORTH KOREA'S PROBLEMS?



Forests are important in developing countries for providing social, environmental, and economic benefits. However, developing countries often overexploit forests, which leads to a reduction in food, biodiversity, clean air, quality of life, and employment.

According to Hayes, "One of the most acute environmental problems in North Korea is deforestation". This problem dates back to excessive felling during Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula, the impact of the Korean War, and poor reforestation practices.

Forestry has always been considered an economic resource rather than a lifeline for the vulnerable; in 1980, Kim Il-Sung stated that "We should strive to afforest the mountains... if we do this, we shall be able to produce more timber". Although the North Korean "government recognises the importance of land management and reforestation", it has not prioritised rectifying deforestation and related unsustainable practices.

# North Korea's Relationship with its Forests

Forests in North Korea are a source of food, medicine, building materials, employment, energy, and natural disaster prevention and protection. Deforestation is mainly done for the selling of timber, and although some is exported to China, North Korea's population uses the majority of it as fuelwood. Forests in North Korea were originally cut down to make way for food production due to shortages, and thus reduced the attainability of other resources. Without successful forestation projects, these resources will become increasingly difficult to obtain and also increase the suffering of the most vulnerable.

## Sustainable Benefits

Reforestation is the process of planting trees in an area that was once forest but has been destroyed, whereas afforestation is the process of planting trees in an area that has never been a forest. Both methods need decades of tree growth before populations can benefit.

Selective felling is the removal of particular trees, either fallen or diseased, to keep forests healthy and profitable. The more land used for forests, the more trees that can be selectively felled, used, and sold, thus a sustainable method of improving the economy. This is unlike clear felling, which is the practice of clearing land of all trees, usually to sell for an instant profit. This has a severe environmental impact such as eliminating protection against soil erosion and natural disasters. As tree growth takes decades, selective felling must be an annual or scarcer practice in order to be sustainable.


## Could North Korea get help?

North Korea has seen mixed results with reforestation projects, which presents an opportunity for international assistance. International assistance could help greatly, bringing in experts and the resources needed to start nationwide forestation projects. These projects would align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) and because of this, the UN may be willing to provide the tools and knowledge needed. However, sanctions already prohibit related materials and equipment from North Korea which would disrupt progress. When reviewing sectoral sanctions in Resolution 2397, forestry machines are prohibited, which would hinder the success of forestation projects. It would be down to the UN to allow for relevant sanctions to be lifted for the sake of North Korea's environment and development, however, it may not want to do this. If the UN does not lift sanctions and reliance is then placed upon non-government organisations, these groups may not have the resources or expertise to implement sustainable forestry practices.



Kumgang Mountain  
Source: Nordkorea 2015 - Kumgang Gebirge

## How would they be managed?



Forestry management involving local communities is becoming increasingly important in developing countries. More than 500 million people in developing countries are dependent on communally managed forests. This management method formed due to concerns that forest ownership was becoming increasingly centralised and unsustainable. Communally managed forests have the potential to improve reforestation, management, social cohesion, employment, and income. However, there has been mixed success as governance of developing countries is rarely democratic.

North Korea could benefit from communally managed forests as it would provide rural communities with the education and skills needed to improve their lives socially, economically, and environmentally. As North Korea's regime is not democratic, there may be issues with success. However, the country could allow for the decentralisation of forest management and give autonomy to rural areas to avoid this. Rural communities would then be self-sustainable and not rely on the regime so much for food, medicine, and materials. Baynes et al. suggest that applying a systems approach and addressing potential issues could improve the success of community forests.

### Conclusion



Forests provide resources for survival within developing countries, but deforestation provides the instant gratification of economic gain, despite negative long-term environmental effects. If North Korea's environment is rectified through these projects and policies, it can have a positive effect on the country's social, economic, and environmental sectors. However, the biggest obstacle to overcome would be the collaboration efforts and assistance needed to do so.

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