

# Missing the forest for the trees

'World Rainforest Week' aims to inform younger generation about preserving one of the Earth's most precious ecosystems

By MICHELLE VOSS  
Staff writer

**R**ainforests are home to 30 million species of plants and animals — over half of the Earth's lifeforms. Two-thirds of the Earth's plant species come from rainforests; many of those plants serve medicinal purposes. Rainforests also are an intricate part to the Earth's global weather system, helping to regulate the water cycle.

Despite these benefits, according to the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) Web site, an area of rainforests equivalent to two football fields is destroyed every second.

In Indonesia, vast tracts of jungle are set ablaze by agricultural development companies and by farmers who burn rainforests as a cheap way of clearing land.

In an effort to increase public consciousness of the importance of these forests, the Texas Environmental Action Coalition (TEAC) is proclaiming this week as World Rainforest Week, with its theme as, "Protecting the World's Old-Growth Forests."

In cooperation with national groups such as RAN, TEAC hopes to inform students about the necessity of preserving the rainforests.

Plans for the week include a booth in the MSC, where members of TEAC will be handing out information and collecting donations for rainforest

restoration efforts.

Joanne Skidmore, president of TEAC and a senior bioenvironmental science major, said cutting down old-growth forest trees and replacing them with seedlings is comparable to taking a man out of society and replacing him with a baby.

Like a baby, a seedling is weak and cannot per-

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**STACEY PORTER**  
SECRETARY, TEAC  
JUNIOR GEOGRAPHY MAJOR

form the same work as older trees.

"After we cut the trees down, the concessions we try to make for that are not adequate, so we're losing that battle," she said.

Our existence relies upon the proliferation of the rainforests, Skidmore said.

"The rainforests regulate global climate, just like coral reefs are very effective in filtering the water in the ocean," she said. "As the rainforests disappear and become more spotty, it will cause

more fluctuation in the global climate."

Another problem associated with the mass destruction of rainforests is the spread of disease, Skidmore said.

"Diseases can come out of the soil when you deplete its natural protection, like tuberculosis," she said. "The soil is a host to thousands of things, and if we unleash that, we don't know what can come out of there [soil in the rainforest] into the world."

Skidmore said preserving the rainforests protects plants that can be used to find new cures for diseases.

A substantial percentage of our pharmaceutical products are already derived from plants in the rainforest and cannot be synthesized in a laboratory, she said.

"There are far reaches of the Earth that we can use and have not even taken an inventory of them yet," she said. "It's a really precarious thing to destroy something like that."

TEAC wants to change perceptions of the rainforest, and their goal this week is to inform students about the role of rainforests in people's lives.

Skidmore said if the younger generation shows more concern for the rainforests and gives more attention to the issues, then the government might realize there is a sector of society it must please.

"We're only victims of a very comfortable society," she said. "There is no need for moral outrage, no need to condemn. But we do need to worry."

Stacey Porter, secretary of TEAC and a junior

geography major, said Americans should be leaders in environmental issues.

"A lot of countries don't have the option of being environmentally conscious, so we definitely need to set the pace in environmental action," she said.

Porter said she is optimistic about America's future for changing environmental policy.

"We can raise our children to have a different paradigm of thinking," she said.

Americans live comfortably, and if we want to continue to have our comfortable standard of living, we must remember to respect the earth, Porter said.

"We take such good care of our clothes and our furniture, but where does it come from?" she said. "Everything comes from the Earth."

Skidmore said the consumers have the power to help the rainforests by not buying products from companies that destroy the rainforests.

"Boycott is such an ugly word, but maybe that is what it takes," she said. "Don't support those causes."

Justin York, vice-president of TEAC and a senior philosophy major, said although environmentalism is no longer trendy, individual people can help by participating in such activities as recycling.

"Lack of information and knowledge is a big factor in destroying things without realizing it," he said.

People can use the resources of the rainforest, Skidmore said, but they cannot exploit it.

"Cutting down the rainforests to meet short-term needs is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal," Skidmore said.



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