



Trees are not just for Christmas

We are back at that season of the year again when the Christmas tree plays its traditional role in family life and in our homes. Trees of course play a much larger role in our lives and indeed ensuring our very existence.

Forests have been called 'the world's lungs' and we are reminded of the book, *The Ages of Gaia*, by James Lovelock published in 1988. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis were revolutionary promoters of this new idea at the time - simple, yet convincing. The whole earth can be seen as an inter-active single living being. Inter-dependent parts and feedback loops, alter and react with one another, to form the evolving cell of the earth. No one part is independent of the others. That includes us... and the forests.

Our earthly body deserves more respect than it has received in the last century or so.

Forests today cover 30 per cent of the land surface of the earth or about 4 billion hectares (approximately 15 million square miles). That's down a third from the pre-industrial-age total of 5.9 billion.

The Amazon covers 570 million square hectares and is the largest concentration

of dense tropical rain forest in the world. Since 1970, 20 per cent of it has disappeared which is an alarming decline. The Amazon holds ten per cent of the world's biodiversity and accounts for 15 per cent of its fresh water; we destroy it at our peril. The rate of destruction slowed in recent years but reports of late claim that mass demolition has surged again this very year, fuelled by efforts to grapple with Brazil's economic problems and altered perspectives on environmental priorities.

Yet a study of satellite data from the last 36 years by a group at the University of Maryland shows a more encouraging picture for the global scene. The area of the world covered by trees has risen by 7% in that time, mainly in Europe and North America. We recall that the largest extent of forest cover is the Taiga or the northern woodlands all across Europe, Asia and North America, and this is where most of the extra tree cover is to be found. The story is one of tropical loss offset by temperate climate gain.

Should we therefore be more relaxed about our lungs of green forest? We might perhaps be more sanguine than those who see immediate peril ahead but relaxation is

too casual to be acceptable.

The fact that more trees are appearing in the northern hemisphere is both welcome and yet a warning in itself. Trees are growing now where they never did in centuries past because global warming has opened an opportunity for them. Further, the range of biodiversity in the tropics is far greater than in cooler climes so the losses near the equator are far more serious than the smaller positive gains elsewhere.

As with so many of the irritating puzzles about the natural world, nothing is straightforward; to-day's actions create consequences for tomorrow. A schoolgirl is reminding us that we damage the world at the cost of her generation's future and for all her immature years she's right to demand answers from her supposedly responsible seniors. After all, when forests are cut down we know what follows... deserts.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 259038.

