

# 2 Recent Storms Show Forests Help Blunt Hurricanes' Force

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TEGUCIGALPA, [Honduras](#), Sept. 6 — There is no way to stop [hurricanes](#), but two fierce storms that slammed ashore recently on the Caribbean coast of Mexico and Central America show the importance of forests and mangrove swamps in slowing them and lessening their human toll.

“The trees secure the ground and offer a buffer from the storms,” said the Rev. José Andrés Tamayo, a Roman Catholic priest and leading Honduran environmental advocate. Forested areas are shrinking, particularly in Central America, and the environmental degradation is one of the reasons that even what would be a run-of-the-mill rainstorm elsewhere can cause deadly floods and mudslides here.

Hurricane Felix, with 160 mile-an-hour winds, burst ashore on Tuesday in one of the most forested areas of northern [Nicaragua](#) and southern Honduras. Although the storm devastated coastal communities, authorities were crediting the trees with sapping it of some of its strength.

“The forests are obstacles for the advance of hurricanes,” said President Manuel Zelaya Rosales of Honduras. The bodies of 24 Miskitos, whose fishing boat had capsized, were found Thursday near the coast of Honduras, said a federal lawmaker for the Honduran region, Carolina Echeverría. Dozens of people were missing. Damage reports have yet to come from at least 70 percent of the villages and towns along the Nicaraguan coast, said a federal disaster official, Jorge Ramón Arnesto Soza.

The hurricane has killed at least 71 people.

In Honduras, Mr. Zelaya acknowledged that hurricanes had become more dangerous with the deforestation that has ravaged the countryside. “We’re trying to correct this, but it will take a decade or more.” In fact, Honduras has suffered the greatest percentage of forest loss of any country in Latin America. Studies show that it has lost more than a third of its forest cover since 1990.

Father Tamayo mobilizes local residents to stop illegal logging by blocking highways and bridges and taking over logging operations in Olancho Province, which has the largest reserves in the country. His group, the Environmental Movement of Olancho, takes on interests, including landowners and illegal loggers. “If we don’t get serious we’re going to turn into a second Haiti,” he said. Haiti, which has been stripped of trees, remains a cautionary tale. The difference between the lush forests in the Dominican Republic and the rocky hillsides on the other side of Hispaniola in Haiti is clear. Hurricane Jeanne in 2004 caused 19 deaths in the Dominican Republic and hundreds in Haiti.

On Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, Ann Snook, of the [Nature Conservancy](#), said she was in her house in Bacalar when Hurricane Dean roared through on Aug. 21. The forests helped weaken it, she said, potentially saving lives.