

50 acres of tropical forest lost every minute

by **ROGER ATWOOD**
in Rio de Janeiro

BOLD new efforts are under way to save the world's vanishing tropical rain forests but have not stopped settlers and loggers from hacking them down.

A survey on three continents found that governments are finally heeding the words of ecologists and acting to conserve the last remaining forests within their borders.

But these steps may be too late or impossible to enforce; tropical rain forests are vanishing at a rate of about 50 acres a minute, the World Wildlife Fund estimates.

In Costa Rica, long praised

for conservation efforts, the last remaining forests outside national parks are expected to fall to the lumberer's chainsaw and the settler's axe by 1995.

"The disappearance of Costa Rica's forests is no longer a projection, but rather something for the historians to study," Natural Resources, Mines and Energy Minister Alvaro Umana said recently. "It's already happened, it's the reality, in spite of the government's efforts."

Scientists have said that the slow demise of rain forests is contributing to a global warming trend. They are only beginning to grasp the full consequences of the "greenhouse effect" but fear it could

spell disaster for agriculture.

The devastation also hastens erosion and disrupts weather patterns. The consequence is both floods and droughts.

Rain forests are home to more than half the world's plant and animal species. As the habitats are destroyed, countless thousands of them are being driven to extinction.

Though they still cover huge tracts of land in Equatorial regions of Latin America, Africa and the vast archipelago stretching from South-east Asia to Australia, bit by bit the forests are falling to settlers, loggers and urban sprawl.

Around the globe deforestation is causing a dual surge of floods and drought.

In the upper reaches of the Parana River basin in Brazil, years of deforestation has reduced the "sponge effect" of the jungle floor, contributing to floods in Paraguay and Argentina.

"When an area is completely deforested, about 10 times as much water runs off because there are simply no roots left in the soil to catch it," said Philip Fearnside, a researcher at Brazil's National Amazon Research Institute, predicting more frequent and more severe flooding.

Deforestation also reduces rainfall. Trees not only prevent erosion but give off moisture. Cut down the trees, and not enough water will evaporate to

fall later as rain.

"It's a vicious cycle. As more and more trees are cut down, the dry season gets longer which in turn makes it harder for the remaining trees to survive," said Fearnside.

The consequence over time could be a steady warming trend around the globe the "greenhouse effect", which is also aggravated by industrialisation and the use of fossil fuels as tonnes of carbon dioxide and other gases from burning trees drift into the atmosphere, scientists say.

Once lodged in the atmosphere, the gases would act as a giant blanket over the earth and prevent heat from escaping.