

Google opens world's forests for all to see

By Suzanne Bohan, Contra Costa Times

CANCUN, Mexico – With Google's new Earth Engine, anyone will be able to view forest conditions worldwide.

When it launches next year, the online tool will provide satellite imagery of forests and will reveal where these woodlands have been razed or degraded by logging.

With Earth Engine, small nations, nonprofit groups, independent researchers and everyone else will be able to assess an environmental crisis of growing magnitude: deforestation. No longer will these groups have to rely on a handful of distant academic or government labs to access the information.

"It's transformational," said Greg Asner, a scientist with the Carnegie Institution for Science at Stanford University, shortly after he described the application Dec. 2 at the United Nation's climate summit in Cancun, Mexico, which ended Friday.

Asner flew to this resort city to announce the successful download of 26 years of data from Landsat, the oldest Earth-observing satellite, into Google's computers. By next year, Asner expects that software he developed for monitoring deforestation will be integrated into Google Earth Engine for public use. Anyone with Internet access will have a free view of forest conditions dating as far back as 1984.

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