

1.1 Forest area

■ One third of Switzerland is covered by forest. Whilst the Central Plateau has relatively little forest, the southern side of the Alps is particularly rich.

■ The forest area continues to expand, covering each year an area equivalent in size to the surface of Lake Thun. The forest is expanding fastest in the Alps.

■ Coniferous forests account for 56% of the forest area and more than twice as much as broadleaf forests. Mixed forests account for the smallest proportion.

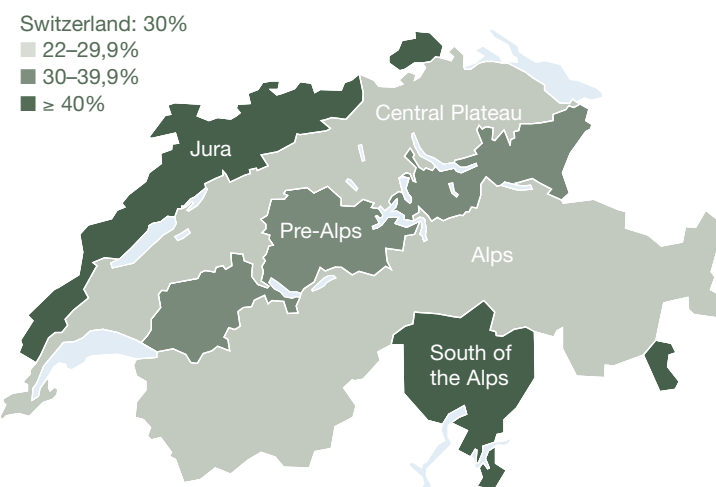
Forest cover

About 30% of Switzerland is currently covered by forest. However, there are large regional differences. Whilst only about 24% of the Central Plateau is forest-covered, forests cover more than 40% of the land on the southern side of the Alps and the Jura. If areas on which trees cannot grow anyway, e.g. on water or above the tree line, are excluded, then the proportion of area covered by forest is even higher: 41% for the whole of Switzerland, rising to 76% for the southern side of the Alps.

If the Swiss forest were to be apportioned per head of population, then it would have to be split into small bits. Since Switzerland is heavily populated, each inhabitant would receive a mere 0.17 hectares of forest. This is equivalent to a 41m² square. However, there are considerable differences between the individual regions. For the inhabitants of Canton Basel-Stadt the sides of such a square would be only 8 metres, but in the Grisons they would be 105 metres.

1.1.1 Forest cover in Switzerland

Proportion of forest in the different forestry regions.





Increase in area

Around 1840 the forested area of Switzerland was estimated to be about 0.71 million hectares. At that time entire mountainsides were being clear-felled and there were numerous floods as a consequence. The first Swiss Law on Forests in 1876 put a stop to the unchecked deforestation. By about 1995 the forested area had increased to about 1.234 million hectares – an increase of about 70%. It should be kept in mind, however, that “forest” was previously defined differently from the way it is today. However, even taking these differences into account, the forest area has grown by about 45% since then. This shows that Swiss forestry policy has been a great success.

And the forests continue to expand. A study of the latest available figures shows that between 1985 and 1995 the forested area grew by 0.4% per year, which is equivalent to about 4800 hectares or the area of the surface of Lake Thun. Every second the forest takes over 1.5 m² of land. This long-term trend has remained unbroken. However, the forested area is not increasing in all parts of Switzerland. The largest increase (7.6%) between 1985 and 1995 was in the Alps. By comparison, the size of the for-

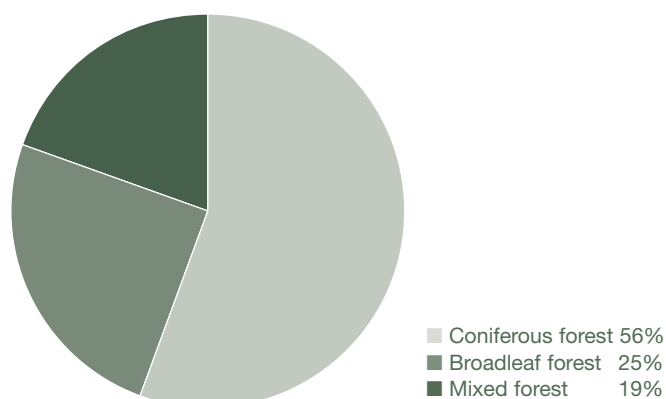
ested area in the Central Plateau hardly changed at all.

Forests are able to expand because less land is being used for farming. But the expansion of the forest is also a result of reforestation, in particular of protection forests, and the legal obligation to compensate for any deforestation with the same amount of reforestation.

Types of forest

56% of Swiss forests are coniferous forests, defined as consisting of at least three-quarters coniferous trees. Broadleaf forests account for 25% of the area and mixed forests for 19%. The predominance of coniferous forests is a result of the cool climate and the fact that, for a long time, forestry favoured conifers.

1.1.2 Distribution of different types of forest
Distribution (%) of different forest types.



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FURTHER INFORMATION

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Changes in the landscape

The expansion of the forest is leaving its mark on Switzerland's landscape and scenery. In the Alps pastures and meadows are becoming degraded because farmers no longer use them, which has both negative and positive effects. Traditionally cultivated land may disappear and with it a landscape considered harmonious and pretty, which affects tourism. Species diversi-

ty is also declining since species-rich meadows are giving way to forest. On the other hand, more forest means more wilderness, which means better habitats for some endangered species.