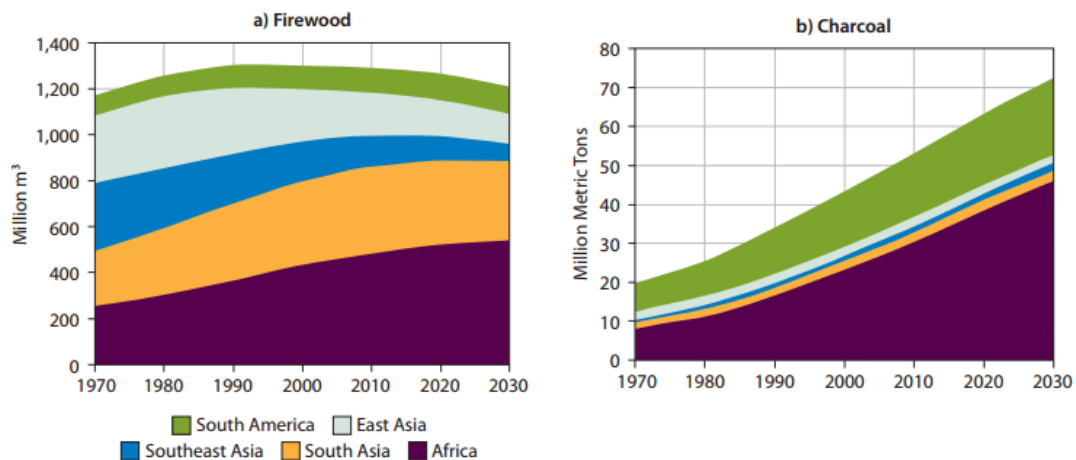


Deforestation facts

Currently, in developing countries across the tropics about 1.3 billion cubic meters of firewood are used each year and around 50 million metric tons of charcoal.



Projections of future firewood and charcoal use in developing countries. A) Firewood consumption is expected to remain constant or to decline over the next 20 years. B) Charcoal use is expected to increase over the next 20 years. (Source: UCS 2011).

Firewood

Most of the firewood is used in rural areas. It is either self-collected or purchased from small dealers. When there is a local scarcity, households tend to buy more firewood, rather than simply collect it. Most firewood does not come from forests, but from trees in lots and woodlands outside of forests. Firewood primarily comes from dead branches or shrubs, not large, live forest trees.

Many reports from development groups or NGO's still claim that firewood is a major driver of deforestation, though there is little empirical evidence to back it up. In the mid-1990s, researchers began to study the "firewood crisis" and discovered that for the most part, there was no crisis after all, only scarcity in some areas. No doubt in many countries the demand for wood fuel destroys the tree cover near villages and towns, which in turn affects the water cycle and could lead to increasing soil erosion. However, in most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, firewood collection and trade is considered a sustainable practise, doing little (or only localised) harm to the environment.



Women collecting firewood

Charcoal

Charcoal production, on the other hand, has a far greater environmental impact than firewood collection. It is made by burning large logs in kilns or in mounds of earth to create low-oxygen environments. Unlike firewood, charcoal usually comes from trunks or large branches and requires cutting trees. The production of charcoal can contribute significantly to degradation and destruction of forests that have already been disturbed by agricultural expansion.

Most charcoal is produced in rural areas and used in urban areas, so producers are not directly linked to consumers. A series of middlemen (traders and transporters) are necessary to complete the supply chain. Charcoal use is expected to increase considerably over the next 20 years. This increase in charcoal demand correlates with the expected increase in urbanization, as urban dwellers use more charcoal than rural ones. Thus, the charcoal supply chain is expected to have an increasing negative impact on the environment.

Conclusion

Wood fuels are still the major source of energy for much of the developing world. As a whole, wood fuels are not a major driver of global deforestation, but they can have negative effects at the local level. This is particularly true of charcoal production, which is expected to increase in the future.

Source: UCS 2011. The root of the problem: what's driving tropical deforestation today? Union of Concerned Scientists. available on line (in PDF format) at:
www.ucsusa.org/whatsdrivingdeforestation.