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IDEAS

Don't wipe your tush with the boreal

We all know the rainforest needs saving. One environmental crusader is out to save trees closer to home — ones that are used to make the most disposable of products.

By **Maura Kelly** Updated October 15, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



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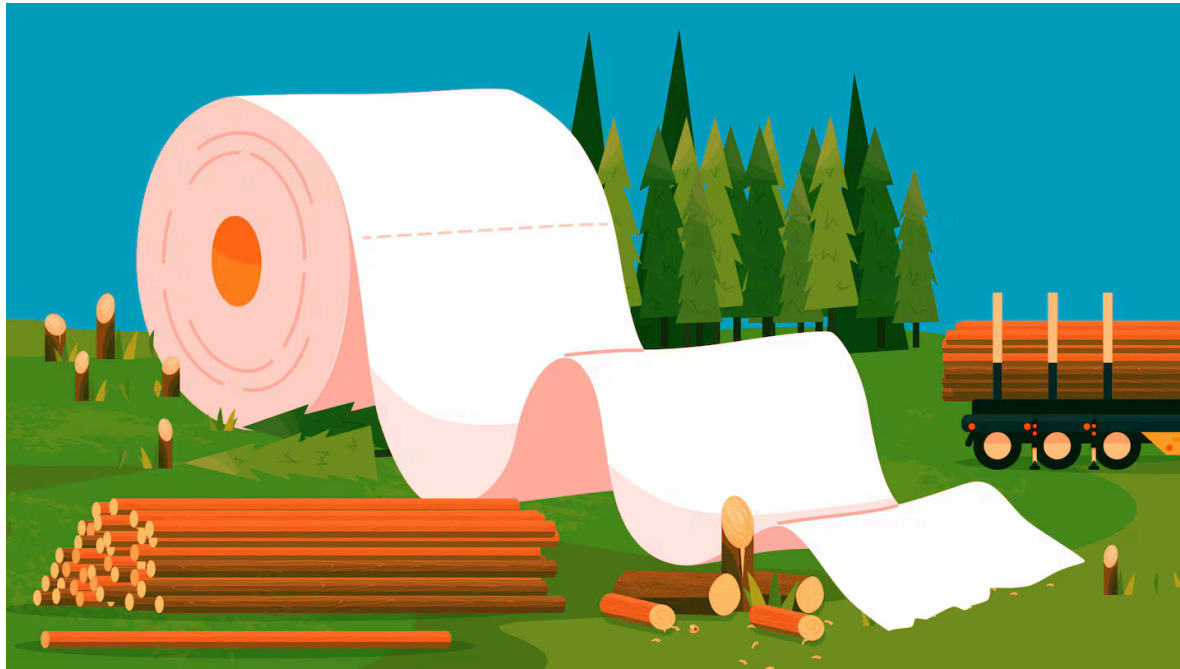


ILLUSTRATION BY LUIS G. RENDON/GLOBE STAFF

Maura Kelly is a writer based in the Boston area.

Brian Rodgers is on a mission to save forests — by making documentaries about the companies destroying them.

He scored a big win against Home Depot with his first film in 2022. The project grew out of a bird-watching trip he took to Ecuador. There, in an area of old-growth trees on the western slopes of the Andes Mountains, he saw extraordinary birds, with names as colorful as their feathers — like the rose-faced parrot and glistening green tanager. But he also saw something that horrified him: “Sixty trucks a day were coming out of this pristine forest area,” he says — and they were loaded down with freshly cut wood. The truck

doors, he says, were emblazoned with the name of a company he identified as a Home Depot supplier.

Only five thousand people have watched [the film](#), but Rodgers made sure Home Depot's board members couldn't ignore it. He barraged them with information packets. Before the company's 2022 shareholder meeting, he took out [a full-page ad](#) in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the paper that serves the city where Home Depot is headquartered. "We are all shareholders in planet Earth," the ad read.

The pressure appeared to work. Rodgers says Home Depot's sustainability director sat down with him for four hours and then called the company's Ecuadorian supplier to tell them to stop cutting from the country's old-growth forest — Home Depot didn't want products made from it. When asked by email, the company's director of public affairs, Sarah McDonald, said the company changed the areas within Ecuador from which it sourced wood in 2023. She also said the company has committed to stop using trees from 10 additional regions, including some in Ecuador, by 2026, unless the wood is certified as sustainable or plantation-grown.

Rodgers is still going after massive corporations for making big bucks at the earth's expense. And this time, he's taking on Procter & Gamble and a consumer product that pretty much

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On [its website](#), P&G claims to be a company that “incorporate[s] sustainability into our products, packaging and operations.” Rodgers scoffs at that. So does the National Resources Defense Council. Rodgers and the NRDC [have accused](#) P&G of using old-growth trees, not from the rainforest but from the vast tracts of [boreal forest that span Canada](#), to make its popular high-end toilet paper, Charmin — a claim P&G disputes.

If the rainforest is the Earth Goddess, the boreal is Old Man Winter. It's characterized not by warm-wet-weather and rubber trees but by snow cover, evergreens, and reindeer. Boreal forest is found in a band around the Northern Hemisphere — including northern Europe, Russia, Mongolia, Alaska, Canada, and even parts of New York's Adirondack Mountains.

Boreal forests are especially good at locking down carbon dioxide, the primary gas that fuels climate change. Like rainforests, boreal forests have an abundance of massive old-growth trees, full of leaves that absorb CO₂ and transform it, through photosynthesis, into energy that in turn feeds the trees. Soil can absorb CO₂ as well. But boreal forests, because they remain frozen for much of the year, have one more carbon-capture advantage — their frozen ground. The cold prevents carbon below the surface from decomposing — so it stays out of the atmosphere much longer than it would otherwise. In fact, the boreal is the Fort Knox of natural carbon storage. It's *twice* as good, acre

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for acre, as the venerable rainforest at locking down CO₂, according to [a 2009 report from the Canadian Boreal Initiative](#).

The Canadian part of the boreal is particularly valuable. Stretching across 1.2 billion acres, it represents an important area of so-called primary forest — [one of the last tracts](#) of true wilderness left in the world, much of it untouched by human activity. That immaculate land provides an irreplaceable home for countless plants and animals — including boreal caribou and [300 bird species](#). It provides food for indigenous peoples who have lived off the land for centuries.

But as much as the Canadian boreal has attracted and sustained a rich array of wildlife, it has also attracted exploitation. European settlers began helping themselves to the trees there in the 17th century — and they never stopped. Over time, logging got more and more efficient. In the 20th century, advances in machinery and transportation made clear-cutting trees especially easy and profitable.

Today, logging companies are increasingly encroaching on the boreal. In the last few decades, industrial lumber has [cleared a chunk of the Canadian boreal bigger than the state](#) of Ohio — [14 million hectares](#). About a third of those trees were [at least a century old](#). And the companies haven't stopped cutting.

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They sell the virgin boreal wood pulp to companies like P&G, Amazon, and [Costco](#), which use it to produce toilet paper and tissues. Put another way, trees that had been around since before World War II are being chopped down to make the most disposable of disposable products.

Plenty of activist groups in Canada — such as the Seal River Watershed Alliance, an indigenous nonprofit coalition — are doing their best to save the land. So are environmental organizations like NRDC and Greenpeace. They've gone after some of the big-name companies involved, including P&G and its competitor Kimberly-Clark, the maker of Cottonelle and Kleenex. They've pressured them to adopt a more sustainable approach by relying on recycled materials or plantation-grown wood. Kimberly-Clark [announced in](#) June that it would significantly reduce its use of tree fiber sourced from Canada's boreal forests. "Those are the types of action that you want a company to take," says Shelley Vineyard, the NRDC's director of global nature initiatives.

But other mega-businesses have made no such promises. Take Amazon. It's the target of a class-action consumer-rights lawsuit, filed in March, alleging that its Basics and Presto! paper products "[contribute to the devastating destruction in Canada's boreal forest](#)," even though the company presents them as eco-friendly choices.

[A similar case](#) is pending against P&G, alleging that when it comes to Charmin toilet paper, P&G "engages in extensive greenwashing practices, all the while supporting [deforestation of sensitive Canadian boreal forests](#)."

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Filmmaker Rodgers agrees with the plaintiffs, saying of P&G's alleged greenwashing, "They've been at it for decades."

Even some members of the P&G founding family are dismayed. "They continue to ignore the real science," says Jim Epstein, a fifth-generation descendant of cofounder James Gamble. Epstein and his children [wrote a letter](#) in 2020 urging P&G to rethink sourcing tree fiber from the boreal — and nearly [one hundred people](#) descended from either Gamble or the company's other founder, William Procter, signed on to it. "New studies are coming out that are showing increasingly the level of damage being done by clear-cutting," Epstein says. "A seminal issue today is what is happening to the earth because of our rapacious use of nature. We are living with the consequences. And what is P&G doing? Nothing."

When I emailed P&G about the lawsuit, its vice president for communications and sustainability, Tonia Elrod, wrote back, "We strongly disagree with the allegations against us." But when I followed up by asking, "Do you source materials from the boreal forest? Please answer with yes or no," I got no response.

Perhaps it's easy to fool the public about a product's eco-friendliness when so few consumers know that the Canadian boreal is fragile, let alone that it's significant. Most Americans first heard of it in 2023, when it started to burn: Unprecedented Canadian wildfires turned the skies over New York City red and caused air quality emergencies throughout America. "Millions breathing

hazardous air as smoke from Canadian wildfires streams south over US,” was the [Associated Press headline](#).

Rodgers is trying to ensure that consumers know more about the boreal than simply that wildfires now occur there. The movie he released this summer, “[Charmin Wipes Out a Forest](#),” has been viewed nearly a million times. He’s doing his best to get P&G on the edge of its seat, too: Ahead of [P&G’s Oct. 14 shareholder meeting](#), he sent its board members information packets similar to those he sent to Home Depot. But this time, he doesn’t foresee a similar happy ending. “P&G will ignore me,” he says. “That’s why we have to take it straight to the people until they say, ‘Charmin, yeah, that’s the one that kills forests.’”

As for what people should buy instead, Rodgers says it’s simple. “Anything that says recycled” is better. Or try a bidet. Just whatever you do, he says, “Don’t wipe your butt with the boreal.”

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