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Loggers, Scorning the Law, Ravage the Amazon

By <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?ppds=bylL&v1=LARRY ROHTER&fdq=19960101&td=sysdate&sort=newest&ac=LARRY ROHTER&inline=nyt-per> **LARRY ROHTER**

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<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/brazil/index.html?inline=nyt-geo> **Brazil** - As soon as the dry season arrives, the loggers swing into action. Day after day from June onward, their empty flatbed trucks depart early in the morning from this dusty settlement along the Trans-Amazon Highway, only to return starting in midafternoon, weighed down with the freshly cut trunks of ipe, jatoba and cedar trees.

No matter that the Brazilian government last year suspended the permits required to chop down trees in this part of the jungle, making timber harvesting illegal for all but a handful of the loggers. No matter either that most of the valuable tropical hardwoods being felled with chainsaws and tractors stand on public lands that, at least in theory, are off limits even to the few timber merchants who still have licenses.

"It goes on all night long, with the traffic so intense some nights, 30 or 40 trucks thundering through, that people can't even sleep," said Milton Fernandes Coutinho, president of the local farmworkers' association, which represents peasant settlers living along the roads used by the loggers. "We've complained over and over again to the government, but nobody does anything to stop them."

Brazilian government statistics suggest that widespread flouting of the law is also occurring elsewhere in the Amazon. Despite regulations that are

more rigorous, at least on paper, and repeated pledges by President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/d/luiz_inacio_lula_da_silva/index.html?inline=nyt-per) to crack down on those pillaging the world's largest tropical rain forest, shipments of wood from the region are booming as never before.

According to government figures, Brazilian timber exports from the Amazon increased in value nearly 50 percent in 2004 over the previous year, to just under \$1 billion. In the first half of this year, when the rainy season traditionally slows down activities, exports rose an additional 20 percent in value.

Over all, nearly 40 percent of the wood cut in the Amazon is now being shipped overseas, compared with only 14 percent in 1999. Brazil's main markets are the [United States](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/unitedstates/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), which accounts for one-third of all timber shipments abroad, followed by [China](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), at 14 percent and growing rapidly, and European countries, which collectively account for 40 percent.

"The problem, though, is that the government's own figures indicate that about 60 percent of those exports are illegal," said Paulo Adario, who directs the Amazon campaign of the environmental group Greenpeace. "So you have to ask yourself: how is it possible that even with logging permits suspended since July 2004, wood exports are continuing to rise so frighteningly?"

Advocates for peasant settlers, including labor unions and Roman Catholic Church officials, answer by pointing to the traditional reluctance of the federal government's environmental and forestry agency, known as Ibama, to act against loggers and sawmill owners. The agency is chronically short of staff and money, its employees are often threatened, and neither the army nor the police are willing to provide protection to inspectors on official missions.

"You can have a thousand laws on paper, but they don't mean anything unless the authorities enforce them," said Erwin Krautler, the Roman Catholic bishop of the Xingu region. Ibama officials, however, argue that they are enforcing the law more aggressively now and have begun making progress. They note that seizures of illegally cut wood are up, that the volume of timber harvested has begun to drop sharply, and that for the

first time ever, a timber merchant was recently jailed for logging on public land.

"As regards issues of monitoring and enforcement, you have to look at the Amazon in a broad context," João Paulo Capobianco, the agency's director of forests, said in a telephone interview from Brasília. "Even if we were to shut off all of the exits, there would still be some places where timber would still leave illegally. But there is no doubt that our performance this year has infinitely improved compared to previous years."

In this jungle region, however, timber trucks still roam freely and unchecked on the rutted dirt roads, with no sign of inspectors. One afternoon in September, for example, a truck loaded down with logs and workers roared into town to drop off the laborers at their homes.

"Is it really necessary to take all these pictures?" one worker asked nervously when a reporter and photographer approached the truck. When asked if his work crew had permits to cut timber, he replied: "No, we don't have any management plan. Nobody here does. You're not going to tell Ibama, are you?"

The truck hurried off, but a few minutes later stopped at a sawmill operated by Nilson Samuelson, a former mayor here. Visible through an open gate was a truck laden with timber. In a telephone interview, Mr. Samuelson - who organized a demonstration here in 2003 against Ibama inspectors at which he said that "we need to bring bin Laden here to teach these people a lesson" - acknowledged that he was breaking the law and said, "My activities are none of your business." He also argued that economic necessity justified his actions. "If you're going to bust me, you're going to have to bust everybody, because nobody here has authorizations," he said. "We're just trying to survive. Who is going to give me the money to pay my employees and educate my children? What are you trying to do, have Ibama wipe me out and leave 250 families without jobs? Who cares about the law? What am I supposed to do, go hungry?"

With large parts of the eastern and southern flanks of the Amazon already devastated, the principal target of loggers and sawmill owners these days is the so-called Terra do Meio, or Midlands, between the Xingu and Iriri Rivers. In fact, the area north of here, between the Trans-Amazon Highway and the Amazon River, is so active that local people have begun calling it <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/index.html?inline=nyt-geo> Iraq. "Because the loggers are

bombing the life out of it," Mr. Coutinho of the farmworkers' association explained.

According to testimony in a parliamentary inquiry into the illegal timber trade, irregularities in another government program have also contributed to the recent lumber boom. Called Legal Harvest, the new program was meant to benefit poor peasants, but according to a report of the congressional committee has become an illicit fund-raising device for Mr. da Silva's Workers' Party.

The program allows thousands of peasant settler families to cut down about 7.5 acres of forest on their lands yearly and to sell the timber to sawmills. But according to the testimony of the president of the state loggers' union, Mário Rubens de Souza Rodrigues, loggers often simply buy certificates from peasants who have already cleared their fields and use the documents to cover up their own illegal harvesting.

In return, loggers and sawmill operators made large donations during the most recent national municipal elections to candidates of the governing Workers' Party, which at the national level is already mired in the worst corruption scandal in modern Brazilian history. Among those named in Brazilian press reports as having taken part in the timber arrangement are the new mayor here and her husband, who is a congressional deputy, and a federal senator and her former husband, the regional chief of the environmental agency.

"The Legal Harvest program has been suspended, but we have no indication that indicates these allegations can be verified," said Mr. Capobianco, the agency official in Brasília. "We think that the plan is the correct way to do things, and it is our intention to continue with this mechanism so long as we can assure conditions that guarantee no fraud is taking place."

Workers' Party officials also deny any involvement in improprieties related to the plan. But government investigators confirm that they are examining the program and that they have found irregularities.

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