

# Spare the Ax, Spoil the Amazon

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## TO DETER ILLEGAL CLEAR-CUTTING, BRAZIL WANTS SELECTIVE FELLING IN THE LARGEST TROPICAL FOREST

The green tangle that is the Amazon rain forest is among the most complex environments in the world. But the threat to this massive expanse is as simple as a mathematical equation.

The Amazon forest holds about one-third of the world's remaining tropical woods, but Brazil accounts for only 4 percent of the tropical timber market. **As other countries, such as Cambodia, chop down their scant remaining tropical forests, it is clear where the world, with its voracious appetite for wood, is going to turn.**

**"Brazilian and international [timber] companies are going to set their sights on where most of the tropical wood remains," says Garo Batmanian, executive director of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Brasilia. "And that's the Amazon."**

The Amazon region, larger than all of Western Europe, is what Brazilians call the "green frontier." Despite more than a decade of alarm about burning and deforestation in the world's last mammoth rain forest, the Amazon is still about 88 percent intact.

But like a once-perfect green carpet that has been worn thin and torn and burned on the edges, the Amazon is showing advancing signs of siege. After a decrease in deforestation rates in the early '90s, government surveys show that as of 1994, the rate picked up again.

**The arrival of tropical wood cutters, who have already bought up more than 11 million acres of virgin forest, constitutes the latest of the Amazon's big threats.** But other long-standing problems are accelerating as well.

Every year, more farmers arrive from other parts of Brazil to try to scrape a living from the earth. The forest, little more than an impediment to them, is cut and burned — even though the rain forest's thin soil isn't conducive to agriculture. "Under traditional slash-and-burn methods, about one-half million hec-

tares [1.24 million acres] would have to be converted from forest every year just to supply food for the Amazon population," says Eduardo Martins, president of IBAMA, the government's environmental and renewable resources institute. **But because the soil of a cleared rain forest supports agriculture for only a few years, already more than one-third of the 124 million acres of the Amazon that have been clear-cut have been abandoned, he says.**

The Amazon's deforestation rate has accelerated because an improved Brazilian economy has increased consumption of wood and meat — the latter causing pressure for fresh grazing lands. A stronger economy allows new roads to be cut, which in turn open new areas to exploitation. Another reason is that woodcutters from other deforested regions (such as the Atlantic rain forest) are moving in, experts say.

But the biggest threat to the Amazon will be wood harvesting, Mr. Martins and other experts say.

**Alarm bells sounded last year when several Asian logging companies, including Malaysia's WTK Group, moved into the Amazon. WTK has earned black marks internationally for its method of logging in Malaysia's Sarawak state on the island of Borneo.**

"We received the Malaysian natural resources minister, who was very aggressive about his lobbying for WTK," Martins says. "We were very clear in return that logging operations in Brazil will have to be sustainable and observe Brazilian law."

But Brazil's forest policy is unclear, critics say. "Brazil does not have a forest policy," says WWF's Batmanian. "There are regulations and decrees and periodic public announcements, but not a clear management plan for what they want with the Amazon."

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After finding that Amazon deforestation had increased, the Brazilian government announced a new measure last year that boosts from 50 percent to 80 percent the portion of their property that land-owners in the Amazon must leave uncut. The government also placed a moratorium on new mahogany concessions and began reviewing — and in many cases canceling — logging permits where sustainable practices were not followed.

**“We canceled more than 70 percent of the existing permits,” says Hamilton Casara, director of IBAMA’s Manaus office. “The problem is that one of the effects has been an increase in clandestine logging.”**

**And clandestine logging is by its nature hardest to control. Only a few hundred environmental inspectors work in this vast region (on the river, at right). And satellites, used increasingly to survey the Amazon’s deforestation, cannot easily detect clandestine tree-cutting. With a mature mahogany tree fetching up to \$20,000 on Brazil’s black market, it’s not difficult to see why the practice continues.**

Some Amazon advocates, both Brazilian and foreign, contend that the best way to save the Amazon is to put it off limits to development, reserving it as one of humanity’s last “natural lungs.” But such an approach is neither realistic nor advisable, Brazilian officials say. The environmental threat posed by illegal activities is exactly why the Amazon must be developed with the economic well-being of its people in mind.

“With sensible laws guiding economic development, I can close down a saw mill or a mining company, but for the have-nothings in a poor state like ours, a fine means nothing,” says Vicente de Paulo Queiroz Nogueiro, president of Amazonas State’s Environmental Protection Institute. “With so many people living outside the mainstream, your only hope is to provide economic opportunities to bring them within the law.”

Some observers remain skeptical of Amazonas State’s interest in preserving the Amazon rain forest: **The current governor, Amazonino Mendes, handed out chain saws in his election**

**campaign.**

But even Amazon advocates who often disagree with the government say the Amazon can be developed to support its population of 17 million and create new wealth for Brazil and the world. Everything will depend on how that development is done.

Deforestation could be steeply reduced if large, unproductive ranches were kept out, says Phillip Fearnside, an ecologist at the National Institute for Amazon Research in Manaus. The government should also change the law that includes clearing land among the “improvements” needed to gain title to a piece of property. New highway projects and a plan to carve two new states out of Amazonas also promise to have a significant impact on the Amazon.

In the face of those pressures, IBAMA, non-governmental organizations, and the World Bank are working to encourage sustainable development projects that open up the Amazon’s trove of woods and fruits without destroying it.

IBAMA hopes to implement a “green label” program by the end of the year that will tell consumers if the Amazon products they are buying were produced with renewable-resource methods. The World Bank is funding several renewable-logging pilot projects in the Amazon. (The Group of Seven most-industrialized countries, on the other hand, has been slow in disbursing funds from a “Save the Amazon” fund for sustainable development projects it announced with great fanfare a few years ago.)

“A lot of things must come together to succeed” in saving the Amazon, Batmanian says: “a long-term management policy, an end to the impunity that lets the disregard for existing conservation measures go unpunished, and more communication among the government, NGOs, and the people. But none of that is impossible.”

Mr. Fearnside, who has been working in the Amazon for 20 years, says it’s easy to be fatalistic about this region, because “most trends extrapolate to disaster.” What gives him some hope is that sensible and serious alternatives are being discussed and put into practice. “There’s still time,” he says; “it depends on what is done with it.”

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