

Brazil: profit and poverty fuel Amazon deforestation

John Levine
15 January 2005

Deforestation in Brazil destroyed nearly 8,000 square miles of the Amazon rainforest in 2004. In 1970, only 1 percent of the Brazilian Amazon had been deforested. By now, between 15 and 25 percent has been lost, with an estimated 1 percent disappearing every year. The area of forest overrun in three decades equals the size of France.

This growing environmental disaster is the product of the desperate poverty of Brazil's farmers, the irrationality of isolationist national development, and the destruction wreaked by global markets dominated by multinational corporations. Without an internationally coordinated management of forests and wildlife, along with a guarantee of a livable wage to all people, no country can maintain threatened ecosystems.

Deforestation poses many unknown risks to the environment, and reduces biodiversity, immeasurably limiting scientific discovery. Humanity has removed about 78 percent of primary forest coverage. Among tropical forests, an estimated 55 percent remains.

Pennsylvania State University professor of environmental sciences James Alcock, predicts that if deforestation continues unabated, within 10 to 15 years it will reach a "point of no return," and the entire Amazon rain forest could be wiped out within 40 or 50 years. The Amazon's destruction would spell drastic changes in the global environment.

A few facts will illustrate the importance for humanity of maintaining this forest. The Amazon River Basin represents a third of tropical forests in the world, covering 2.3 million square miles. It stretches over parts of Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. It covers about 60 percent of Brazil's surface. The Amazon River itself contains 20 percent of the joint volume of all the rivers on Earth, and the Amazon rainforest produces about 20 percent of the world's

oxygen.

About half of the world's plant and animal species are native to the Amazon forest. Many species at risk of extinction have never even been discovered, much less studied. Many scientists consider it the most diverse ecosystem, with at least 60,000 species of plants, 1,000 species of birds and more than 300 species of mammals. Two and half acres of the Amazon contain more plant species than all of Europe. Among these plants and animals are 33-foot long Anacondas, 10-foot-long, half-ton manatees, and the vitória-régia, the world's largest flower with a diameter that reaches over 6 feet.

Beyond pure scientific fascination, the biodiversity in the forest contains many practical uses. Much of the developed world's diet originated in rainforests, including oranges, bananas, coffee, chocolate, potatoes, rice and tomatoes. There are some 3,000 fruits in the rainforest, only about 200 of which are in use in the Western world. Besides food, 25 percent of pharmaceuticals were derived from rainforest ingredients, and a vast majority of the trees and plants there have never been tested. Some studies of the concoctions of tribal medicine men have led to a number of new medical developments.

To understand the forces leading to the destruction of the rain forest, it is necessary to look at the main features of Brazilian society. While it is the largest economy in South America, and the eighth-largest in the world, Brazil is also among the world's most unequal societies.

The wealthiest 10 percent of the population takes in almost half the national income. In contrast, the poorest 10 percent barely survives on 0.7 percent of the income. The richest fifth of the population controls 60 percent of the wealth and the poorest fifth accounts for

2 percent. Less than 3 percent of the population controls two thirds of the arable land. In the late 1990s, when this measurement was last taken, about 20 percent of the population held 88 percent of the land, while the poorest 40 percent owned just 1 percent.

Thirty percent of Brazilians—54 million out of 180 million—live below the poverty line, which itself is drawn quite low. Over 22 percent live on less than two dollars a day. Eighty percent of the population lives in the cities, often in shantytowns with inadequate water supplies, health facilities and education.

The poorest 10 percent also go hungry in one of the largest agricultural exporting countries in the world. In rural areas, more than 20 million people, are landless. Topping off this mass of inequalities is the painful fact that 60 percent of arable land remains idle.

Those people without land either enter a miserable life in the city or eke out a living as sharecroppers, squatters or migrant workers. The enormous contradictions in Brazilian society drive people into the forest to obtain timber and land as a means of survival, all the while concentrating more wealth in fewer hands.

Rather than finding prosperity, people moving to the Amazon enter a frontier overrun by criminality, government corruption and exploitation by multinational corporations. Those reporting abuse of the forest to government agencies often face violent persecution. Multinationals buy up lumber, soybeans and beef produced on these lands, even if they are obtained by means that violate Brazilian law.

Brazil's government has little incentive to maintain the forest either. Blairo Maggi, the governor of the state of Mato Grosso, said in an interview, "Less than 15 percent of Brazil's Amazon basin has been opened up for economic activities.... Both Europe and the United States grew by taking advantage of their natural resources ... and I think it is unacceptable interference, when they come and tell us what we should do. Brazil has its own environmental legislation, one of the most rigorous in the world, and yet we're treated as if we're bandits."

This governor also happens to be the world's largest soybean farmer, with the nickname "Rei da Soja," the King of Soya. Soy plantations have developed and spread over the Amazon, bringing profits to large landowners through exports to the United States and other more developed countries.

Cattle ranching has also vastly expanded into these areas. Between 1990 and 2002, the Amazon's cattle population more than doubled, reaching 57 million. During the same period, the percentage of Europe's processed meat imports that came from Brazil grew from 40 to 74 percent. Forty percent of Brazil's exported beef goes to Europe. David Kaimowitz, the director general of the Center for International Forestry Research, told the *Guardian*, "The deforestation is being fuelled by beef exports, with cattle ranchers making mincemeat out of the rainforests." According to Kaimowitz, logging only contributed to deforestation indirectly.

In January 2001, Brazil's government announced a US\$40 billion plan to cover a large part of the rainforest with 10,000 km of highways, as well as dams, power lines, mines, gas and oilfields, canals, ports, logging zones and other elements of industrialization. The plan, named "Avanca Brasil," appears on the surface to be a progressive development, based upon technological improvements that have the potential of raising the living standards of many of Brazil's poor. One doubts, however, that under a capitalist government this will benefit anyone but those already rich.

Brazil's president, Luis Inacio da Silva (Lula), announced some funding for new measures to restrain deforestation. Like Lula's programs to redistribute land and help the poor, these measures will likely remain largely on paper. Realistically, Brazil cannot risk slowing the pace of economic development for fear of financial consequences imposed by the global economy.

Within the context of the world capitalist market, the rational utilization and preservation of the world's resources are impossible. If precious resources like the Amazon rainforest are not to be squandered to benefit the rich, the rule of corporations and finance capital must be replaced with a planned socialist economy on a world scale.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact