

Amazon under siege

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Pará accounts for over one-third of the total Amazon deforestation in Brazil. Deforestation for timber and cattle ranching is commonly linked with the employment of slave labor.
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In Pará there is an undeclared war going on over land, over forest resources and over rapid profit at any price. Today, illegal occupancy of public land, violence, murder and modern-day slavery form the secret face of Amazon destruction.
© João Ripper/Magens Humanas

The Amazon Basin covers five percent of the land surface of the planet, extending over some 7.8 million km². It has 25,000 km² of navigable rivers and contains around 20% of the Earth's fresh water. Its forests represent one of the most important ecosystems on Earth, accounting for 45% of tropical forests and storing 40% of the carbon residing in terrestrial vegetation. Almost half of all known species live in the Amazon. Among them, 353 species of mammals, 3,000 fish species, 1,000 species of birds, 60,000 plant species and an estimated 10 million species of insects. The Amazon plays a vital role in maintaining biodiversity, regional hydrology and climate.

Despite decades of intense focus in the spotlight of international environmental concern, the Amazon is today more than ever under siege from the loggers, farmers, and politicians who view it as a modern Eldorado to be plundered for profit.

This development has been an environmental disaster and has had a lasting detrimental impact on indigenous peoples who have lived in the region since colonial times, and forest dwelling communities who migrated to the region during various waves of occupation of the Amazon. This short-lived cycle of forest destruction, often justified by those who defend it in the name of economic development, concentrates lands in the hands of a few landlords, resulting in a situation of poverty for those communities who live in the region as their means of subsistence is degraded, affecting hunting, fishing and other traditional resources.

Pará - State of conflict

The Brazilian Amazon has one of the world's highest absolute rates of forest destruction, currently averaging around 18,000 km² per year. The latest data shows a forty percent increase in deforestation, reaching 25,276 km² in just one year.

Of all Brazil's Amazon regions, it is the State of Pará that has suffered the worst impact from logging. Covering an area over 1.2 million km² Pará has lost an area of rainforest the size of Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland combined. Pará today is the largest timber producing and exporting region in the Amazon, accounting for 40% of production and 60% of all exports from all Amazon States.

An estimated one-third of timber produced in Pará is now exported, making it the second most valuable commodity exported from the state (after minerals). In 2002, Pará exported at least US\$ 312 million in timber products, to markets in the USA (34.9%), France (13.7%), Spain (8.1%), the Netherlands (7.4%), China, Portugal, the Dominican Republic, Japan and the UK, amongst others.

"Impunity and lack of control make possible that most of the wood is illegally exploited, with no concern about the reproduction and conservation of the species."

Brazilian National Report to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, April 2003. Source: BBC 2002. Brazil's rainforest slaves, by Olenka Frenkiel. Crossing Continents, 30 July 2002

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*Cattle ranchers follow the direction of loggers into the region, because logging activities capitalise, directly or indirectly, the actual and potential cattle ranchers.
© Greenpeace/Napchan*

*The Amazon region is of critical importance to forest dwelling communities and to wildlife, sheltering numerous species including jaguars, giant alligators, spider monkeys and anteaters.
© Greenpeace/Greig*

To refer to Pará in terms of warfare, as a 'State of Conflict', is no exaggeration: there is an undeclared war going on – over land, over forest resources and over rapid profit at any price. Today, illegal occupancy of public land, violence, murder and modern-day slavery form the secret face of Amazon destruction.

Pará's story is one that resonates throughout the Amazon. It tells of a 'boom and bust' cycle whereby loggers exploit the land, strip it of forest cover and abandon it to cattle ranchers or other large-scale farming ventures. Fuelling this cycle is a state of lawlessness in which land invasions and illegal occupancy of public land are backed by violence and even murder. Pará has Brazil's highest rate of assassinations linked to land conflicts, and these are hardly ever investigated. As local forest dwellers who depend on the land for hunting, fishing and small-scale farming are forced away from their territory, the gulf between rich and poor in Pará widens.

In remote, hard-to-police areas of the forest, deforestation is frequently driven by slavery. Workers are lured into forest areas with promises of well-paid farm work, and become trapped in debt bondage, working under dangerous and inhumane conditions for little or no pay. Those who try to escape are sometimes killed.

If the conflict is not brought under control, the weaker side--local communities and Indigenous groups--will pay the highest price. Ultimately, Brazil stands to lose hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of the Amazon, along with millions of animals and plants, some species becoming extinct forever. Not only Pará State, but Brazil may lose the opportunity of opening the way to a better and sustainable future.

Land without law

The struggle for land has become most significant, and often violent, in two key frontiers in the west of Pará: the regions of Porto de Moz and Prainha, on the left bank of the Xingu River; and the Middle Land, a large area of relatively intact forest, between the Xingu and the Tapajós rivers. The Transamazon Highway and the legally protected Indian lands, south of the Highway, separate these two regions.

Having plundered much of the rest of Pará, loggers, cattle ranchers and land speculators are turning these regions into the new lawless frontiers. Although Brazil has far-sighted environmental laws, policing them has proved almost impossible. The lack of governance and law enforcement has led to a situation where murder, violence, slavery, land invasions and illegal occupancy of public land are characteristic of this region of Pará. This complete lack of the rule of law makes it easy for the logging companies or large-scale farmers to seize and exploit public lands.

"In our region there are so many families that don't have any land left because big logging companies have taken everything."

Community woman, Porto de Moz, 2002. Name omitted for security reasons..

"...all illegal action aimed at transferring public land to the assets of third parties constitutes grilagem"

White Book of Illegal Land Appropriation in Brazil, INCRA 2000.

'Gunmen are often used to push and throw local people off their pieces of land.'

National Report to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, April 2003

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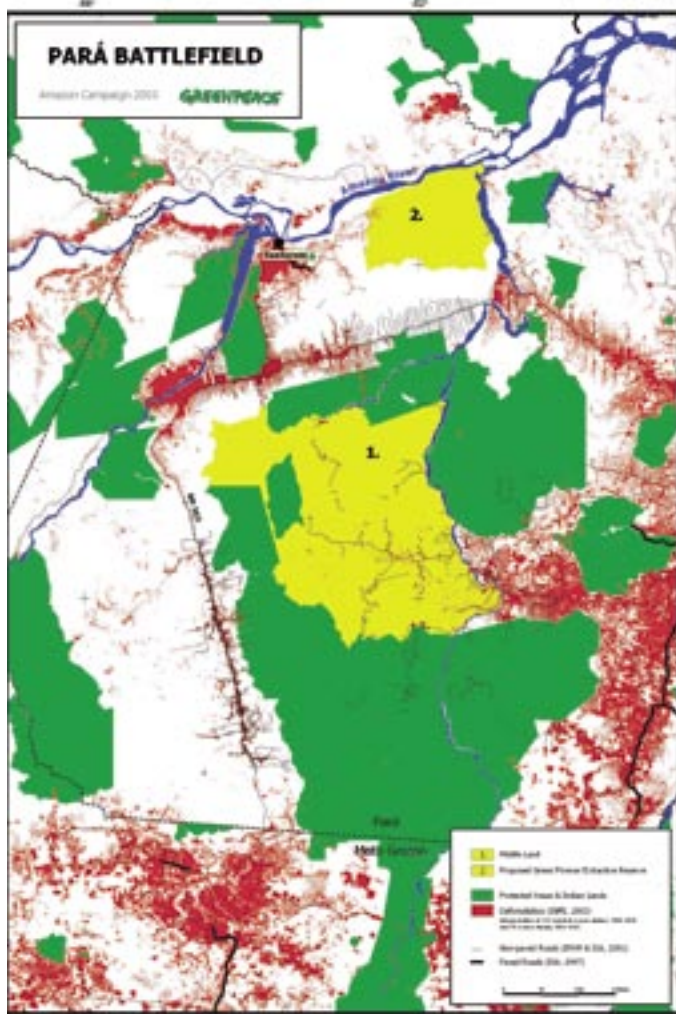


Here, the Federal Police force has been cut to a quarter of its size twenty years ago, and an illegal assault on the rainforest is underway.

In the face of the threat to their traditional lands, local inhabitants in the regions of Porto de Moz and Prainha are joining forces to propose the creation of Extractive Reserves, areas protected by Federal law for conservation and sustainable use by traditional communities. The proposed "Verde para Sempre" and "Renascer" reserves have become the target of angry opposition from logging and political interests, particularly since 400 community members took direct action in late 2002 to blockade barges loaded with illegal timber destined for export.



Federal government agents, accompanied by Greenpeace's investigations team, converge on illegal mahogany logging on public and indigenous lands around the Middle Land, October 2001. © Greenpeace/Beltra



The conflict for land and forests today is raging most intensely in two key unprotected frontiers in the west of Pará, the Middle Land (1) and Porto de Moz regions (2). Proposals for formally protecting these areas have so far not been officially supported by the State and Federal governments in Brazil. © Greenpeace



Fearing the loss of their traditional lands, and desperate to put an end to illegal and predatory logging, the communities from Porto de Moz are demanding the creation of an Extractive Reserve in the region in order to guarantee their land rights and protect their natural resources. © Greenpeace/Rouvillois

Greenpeace demands

Greenpeace believes that the real long-term future of Pará lies in a new social and economic model of sustainable use of the forests combined with areas of protection. Logging companies committed to truly legal, sustainable and certified operations have a place in this future, but the main effort must be concentrated on bringing governance and environmental and social justice to the Amazon. The only way to achieve this is through the strong commitment of the Brazilian Federal and State governments, backed by international cooperation, to empower the traditional communities and other forest dwellers to become the driving force for economic development and environmental protection in the Amazon.



"So he [Mayor Campos] sent a group of soldiers to humiliate me so that I would sign a document, probably so that I would authorize them to pull down my fence, as they did. His gangsters were all armed, with revolvers, machine guns. My son asked if (they) had brought any judicial order for this. And they brought four chainsaws to destroy my fence." Senhor Carnaci, a farmer of about 70 years of age from Colônia Majari, Porto de Moz. ©Greenpeace/Rouvillois

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Tired of waiting, in September 2002 about 400 community members blocked the Rio Jaurucu, to protest against the destruction of their forests. Greenpeace supported their activities.
© Greenpeace/Cannalonga

Extractive Reserves

“Today RESEX is the only judicial instrument which recognises the right of ribeirinhos to the land.”

Felicio Pontes Jr., Para Federal Public Prosecutor – April 2003

Extractive Reserves (RESEX) are areas protected by law designated for the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources by the traditional communities inhabiting them. This model was developed in the 1980s by forest dwellers under the leadership of Chico Mendes and the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) and adopted by the Brazilian Federal government in 1990.

These reserves guarantee local families the collective right to land and its natural resources, allowing them to support themselves by their traditional economic activities, while preserving the environment.

The responsibility to create a RESEX lies with the Federal government, but it is up to local communities to team up and request its creation.

The murder of Chico Mendes by farmers in December 1988 led to his worldwide recognition as an environmental martyr. In 1990, the Federal government issued the Extractive Reserves General Decree which established the legal basis for the creation of such areas. In March 1990, the Brazilian government created the ‘Extractive Reserve Chico Mendes’, covering 970,570 hectares in the Amazon state of Acre. Since then, another 12 reserves have been created in the Amazon, giving collective ownership and control to local communities in a total area of 3.5 million hectares.

A further law from 2000, and a Decree issued in 2002, proclaims that Conservation Units should be created throughout the national territory as an instrument for consolidating public environmental protection policies established by the Ministry of the Environment.

“ In the Amazon, the State is the main driver for the transformation of the economy.”

Brazilian Presidential Candidate Luis Inácio da Silva Lula’s Program of Government, 2002. “O Lugar da Amazônia no Desenvolvimento do Brasil”, Program of Government, “Lula President”- 2002

“...[the Program of Government would] create extractive reserves in areas occupied by traditional communities that use natural resources in a sustainable way”

Brazilian Presidential Candidate Luis Inácio da Silva Lula’s Program of Government, 2002. “O Lugar da Amazônia no Desenvolvimento do Brasil”, Program of Government, “Lula President”- 2002

Protect Life on Earth

Life on the planet is rapidly disappearing, our forests are being destroyed and our oceans are being depleted. Local peoples are being robbed of the natural resources they need for their survival. At this year’s CBD governments must stop this destruction and honour the commitments they have already made to stop the trend of biodiversity loss. Governments must provide money for this urgently needed protection instead of wasting it on wars and activities that ultimately end life rather than protect it. Instead of having endless discussions about the devastation, governments must stop the destruction now. As the future guardians of the planet, we have the right to receive a planet rich in life.