

With the possible exception of certain endangered species and NASA images of the growing holes in the ozone layer, there is no issue on the global environmental agenda as “photogenic” as tropical deforestation. Images of forests in flames or of heavy curtains of smoke enveloping huge swaths of the western Amazon and of Southeast Asia have, for better or worse, etched “tropical deforestation” onto the public consciousness. It has especially come to be identified with the destiny of Amazônia, and of the lion’s share of the Amazon rainforest that is located in Brazil. This is no accident. From the end of the 1960s to the present, an area bigger than France has been destroyed or seriously damaged (Veja, 1997).

Tracking the ebbs and flows of Amazônia as an issue provides us with a fascinating case study in environmental politics, both domestic and international. Over the last century, Amazônia has occupied a special place in the imagination—at once environmental “goods” pay their own way—

encouraged in that position by domestic and multilateral economic actors—makes it unlikely that this situation will change any time soon. As a result, whenever Amazonian conservation measures require legislative approval or serious political support in Brazil, they founder. These political impediments reinforce a tendency among conservationists to bypass political organs, thus fueling the latter’s suspicions of conservationists’ motivations and contributing to a vicious circle of distrust that results in further degradation.

There have been very constructive efforts in recent years to identify sustainable Brazilian local land uses and to involve local people in conservation activities. Following the murder of rubber-tapper leader Francisco “Chico” Mendes in December 1988, the federal government established several extractive reserves to facilitate nonpredatory use of the forest for harvesting of rubber, Brazil nuts, and other activities. Interest in “sustainable” forest products, spurred by private firms like Ben and Jerry’s and The Body Shop, led both local and international NGOs to pay more attention to inventing low-technology processes that would make more of this possible. A Rondônia-based NGO, for example, pioneered a process that mechanized separation of cupuaçu pulp from other parts of the fruit; it was eventually bought out by a large Brazilian frozen food company. One now finds in supermarkets in the south of Brazil fruits and juices like Açai and Cupuaçu, formerly only found in Amazônia itself.

But these advances are only small-scale improvements and should not be taken as a sign that

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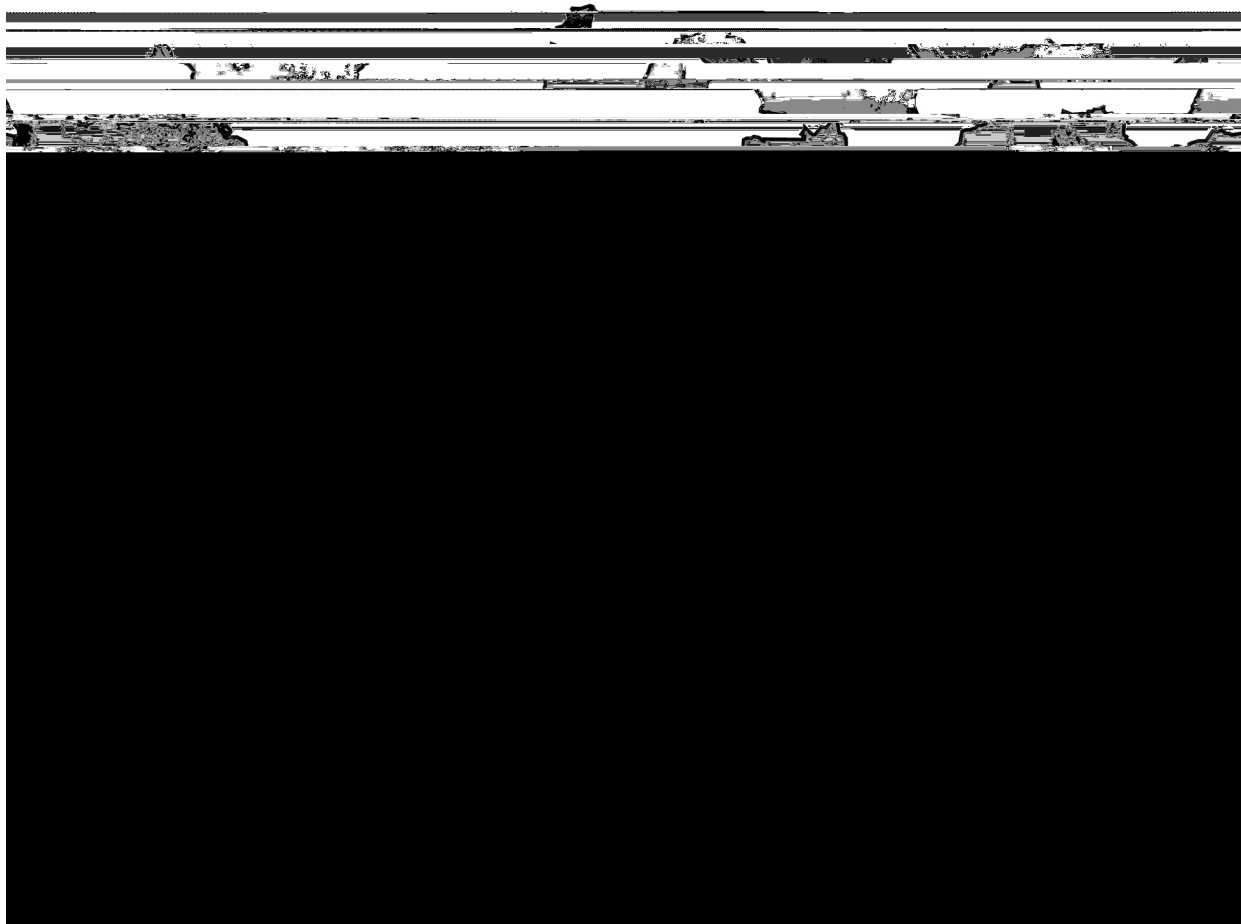
activity in which new issues and actors suddenly win attention and succeed in getting action on a problem which may either be new or have been languishing in relative neglect for a long time. There are any number of reasons for such moments, ranging from a natural disaster to the passage of a new law to a regime transition. These stimuli produce political opportunities; but unless these opportunities are seized by strategically-minded actors, they are normally missed. Even at moments replete with opportunity to dramatize an issue, the political skills needed to do so have to contend with the political skills of opponents. In the recent history of Amazônia, the political skills have too often been in the hands of the forces of devastation.

HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN AMAZÔNIA

Amazônia has a long history of cycles—not only

of boom and bust, but also of periods of geopolitical significance alternating with periods of relative neglect. The region was first linked to the rest of the country by telegraph, and many of its territories were demarcated at the beginning of the 20th century by the expedition led by Marechal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon in 1907. Rondon's mission coincided with the end of the rubber boom, caused by the successful British effort to produce latex on its Asian colony plantations. Nonetheless, the mission made possible the mobilization of Brazilian rubber tappers to reactivate the production of natural latex during World War II, when the rubber plantations of Southeast Asia were under the control of the Axis powers. Rondon himself was quite sympathetic to the fate of indigenous peoples in the region, and much of the protective legislation regarding Indians was enacted as a result of his encounters. But like their counterparts elsewhere, Indians in the Amazon came out of the

Map 1. Deforestation in the Amazon, 2001



Source: Oregon State University (2001, January 18)

encounter with new epidemic diseases as well as the prospect of intensified settlement of their ancestral lands.

In the late 1960s, the Brazilian military dictatorship incorporated the Amazon explicitly into a national security agenda, with a focus more geopolitical than explicitly domestic. The importance to the regime of settlement and development of the region derived from (a) a belief that subversion could

out “the need for careful consideration of the environmental problems involved in Amazonian development” (“The Opening Up of Brazil,” 1972). UNESCO picked up IUCN’s concern and made conservation of the Amazon rainforest the first project of its Program on Man and the Biosphere in 1971. But the Brazilian military government viewed the conservationist position as unwarranted interference in both its domestic and national security affairs. For

By assuming a strongly nationalist position at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972, the Brazilian government put the international community on notice that it regarded environmentalists’ calls for preserving the Amazon rainforest as attacks on Brazil’s sovereignty.

take root in neglected and scarcely populated areas, and (b) a desire to demonstrate Brazil’s greatness through the enormous wealth of natural resources held by the region. The view of the Amazon as repository of wealth, and of Brazil’s destiny as coupled with development of that wealth, persists today. Thus, foreign efforts to influence Brazil’s actions in the region have long been seen as the result of the *cobiça internacional*—international covetousness—regarding the region’s resources (Reis, 1982).¹ The most recent wave of political attention to the region came in the late 1980s, stimulated from abroad as tropical deforestation became part of the agenda of “global” ecological problems.

Inventing “Tropical Deforestation”

In fact, the term “tropical deforestation” made it onto the international agenda in the first place because of the Brazilian Amazon. As late as 1968, the Latin American Conference on Conservation of Renewable Natural Resources had no session on forests, and in the index for volume 2 of the *IUCN Bulletin*, covering the period from 1967-1971, there is no entry for forests, deforestation, or tropical forest. The problem had not yet been named.

However, conservationists both inside and outside of Brazil worried about the development programs that the military government launched in the 1960s. Responding to the Brazilian government’s decision to accelerate colonization and development plans in the region, IUCN—The World Conservation Union—President Harold J. Coolidge and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) President Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands wrote to Brazil’s President Médici in 1972, pointing

most Brazilian officials, conservationists were just stalking horses for foreign governments seeking to prevent Brazil from achieving the place in the sun that its rapid development seemed to promise (Castro, 1972).

By the early 1970s, a massive program of road building was luring wave upon wave of settlers to the region—in search of opportunity, a plot of land to call their own, or perhaps a chance to strike it rich with tin or (later) gold. As the chain saws felled larger swaths of forest, organizations like IUCN and WWF encouraged Brazil’s Environment Secretary Paulo Nogueira Neto to create consort

universities vastly increased the store of basic scientific knowledge about the region's ecology, while historians, anthropologists, geographers, and the occasional political scientist studied its peoples.

What of Brazilian *environmentalists* during this period? Although a Brazilian Environmental Secretariat was established after the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, and Nogueira Neto (a longtime conservation activist in São Paulo and well-known in international conservation circles) was named its head, this secretariat had no authority to challenge what other agencies in the government were doing and almost no resources to do anything on its own (Interview, Nogueira Neto, 1991). Despite these limits, Nogueira Neto managed both to raise the profile of environmental issues in the press and to establish a few

Map 2. Amazonian States



International pressure to control the situation produced a nationalist response as it had a decade earlier—but this time Brazil was in a much less favorable position to resist. Events and rhetoric about Brazil during the 1972 Stockholm conference were far different: the Transamazon Highway had just opened, glossy magazines had proclaimed a new life on the frontier, and critics of Brazil's Amazon policy had been cast as spoilers who wanted to impede Brazil's glorious progress. But by 1988, the Transamazon Highway was overgrown, crater-filled (barely passable by motorbike at some points), and lined with deserted settlements, victims of too many hopes with too little infrastructure and extension support. The new life on the Amazonian frontier had made a few people rich, but it had broken as many dreams as it had fulfilled. Consequently, at least some of the skepticism about what was going on in the region was homegrown.

The years 1987 and 1988 were record years for Brazilian deforestation—not because of a sudden peak in new settlements or new ranching operations in the region, but for political reasons. In the Brazilian Constitutional Congress underway at the time, there was a real possibility that agrarian reform measures would be adopted. The prospect led to the creation of a rapidly organized counterattack by rural landowners under the leadership of the UDR (the Rural Democratic Union), which eventually succeeded in gutting the redistributive planks of the new charter. However, ranchers and others with large landholdings in Amazônia did not want to take any risks. Since any land-reform measure was likely to focus on so-called “unproductive” land, they looked for ways to make their expanses appear productive. At that time, one of the ways to demonstrate that land was productive was to clear it; such clearing counted as an

improvement, which added value to the property. And in case clearing was not enough, it was always possible to add a few cows. As a result, around 300,000 square kilometers of forest were destroyed in the last years of the 1980s (Hecht 1992, page 21).

Giving the Rainforest a Human Face

In the late 1980s, Brazilian environmentalists gained a whole new set of arguments tying conservation of the Amazon forest with protection of human extractive activities. Brazil nut gatherers, rubber tappers, and fishers were highlighted as examples of groups that lived in and off the forest without destroying it. But the livelihoods of these groups, small though they might be, were being threatened by the advancing settlement frontier. Accounts of their endangered situations created a

reserve—a form of protected area that allowed for collection and sale of renewable forest products (natural latex, Brazil nuts, and some others) under the protection of the national environmental agencies. Paulo Nogueira Neto was receptive to the idea, and it won support both from environmentalists in southern Brazil and from those in the United States and Western Europe who were campaigning to make the multilateral development banks (especially the World Bank) more environmentally responsible (Keck, 1995; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; and Keck, 1998).

When Chico Mendes was murdered in the midst of sustained international attention to deforestation in the Amazon region, the issue attained unprecedented salience. Brazilian President José Sarney created the first extractive reserves and took steps to curb some of the worst abuses in the region (though

Worried that piecemeal solutions could not address the problem, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) introduced in the mid-1990s an audacious campaign to try to get the Brazilian government to commit formally to conserving 10 percent of the Amazon forest.

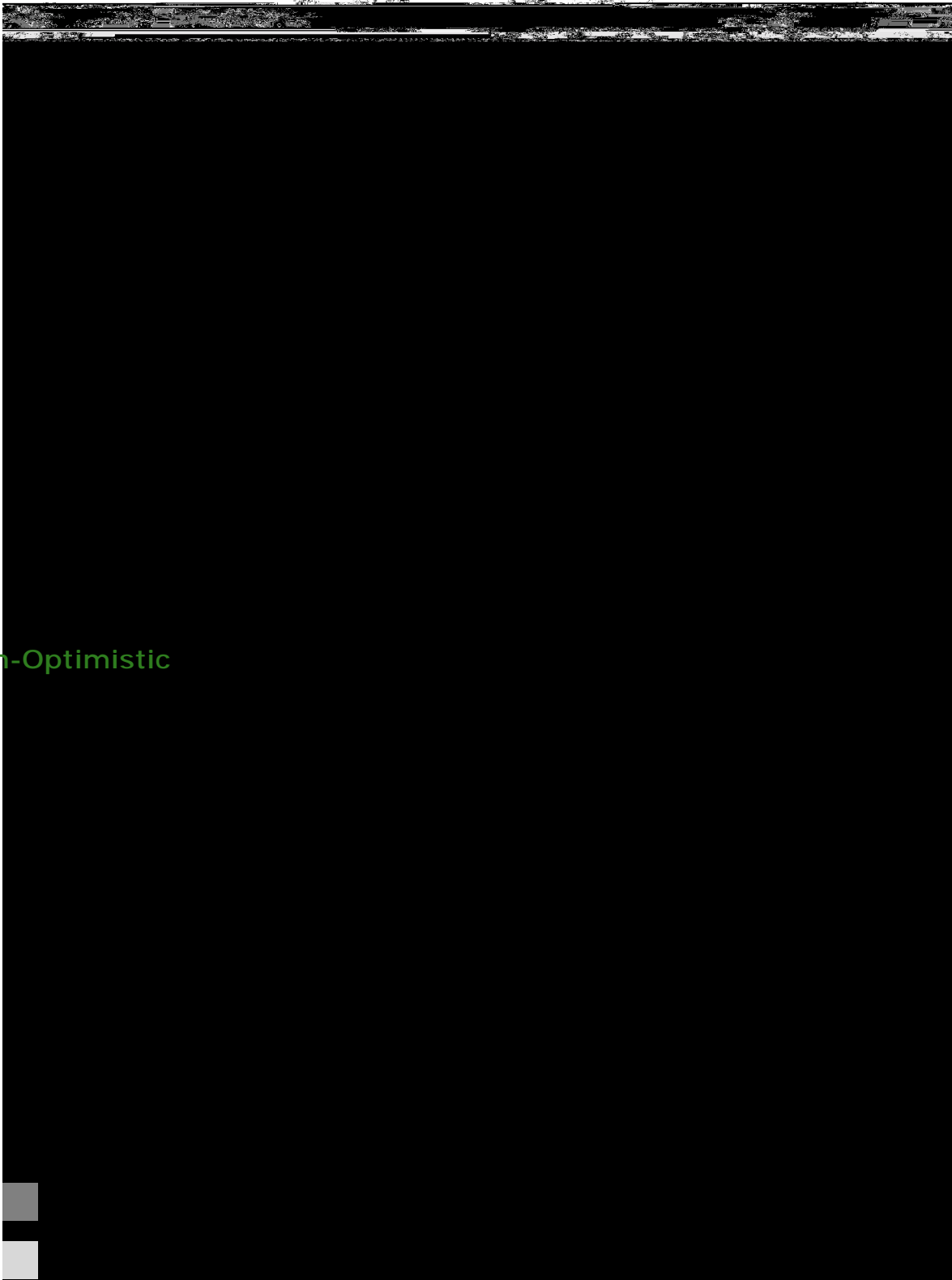
powerful narrative contesting the government's claim that fighting poverty required the large-scale development (and hence deforestation) of the Amazon (Keck, 1995). When rubber tappers' organizations from the western Amazon made common cause with environmentalists, it also undermined the popular tendency in Brazil to dismiss environmentalism as a hobby for the well-heeled and well-fed. In addition, the assassination of Franciscine

policy reforms to reduce deforestation. In the package of policies known as “Nossa Natureza” (Our Nature), President Sarney announced the consolidation of existing forest and fisheries administrations into a single environmental institute called the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Resources (Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis—IBAMA). IBAMA was charged with monitoring and licensing the cutting of forested areas. However, IBAMA was seriously understaffed in the field, and plans for increased monitoring proved hard to carry out when under-qualified field personnel lacked even funds to buy gas for the cars and boats they were expected to use. Thus, despite both policy change and sophisticated satellite monitoring capabilities developed at the Brazilian Institute for Space Research (INPE), the drop in deforestation rates after 1987 and into the 1990s were mainly because of recession, not state action. After the recession ended, high rates of deforestation returned—and 1997 looked much more like 1987 than the decade in between. When a wave of land occupations led by Movimento dos Sem Terra (the Landless Movement) at the end of the 1990s put agrarian reform back onto the political agenda, the rate of burning again skyrocketed almost immediately.

The use of the 1987 baseline was only one of the elements that allowed the Brazilian government to buy time through the early 1990s. Another was the successful bid by Brazil to host the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and

Amazonian Deforestation Projections for 2020

Optimistic



Source: Oregon State University (2001, January 18)

supporters may appoint part of their own political coterie to public jobs. In addition, the political appointment process usually reaches several levels down, and the sponsor of names for the second and third echelon appointees may not be the same as the one who appoints the department heads. As a result, different levels of the same bureaucratic agency may or may not share a common agenda or governing style. These officials are constrained by the political sponsors at whose behest they serve. They can be removed through the same political process that appointed them in the first place, either because they fall out of favor with their immediate sponsor or because the sponsor shifts allegiances or falls out of favor with the governor, mayor, or president who heads the coalition. The extent to which these officials can take unpopular positions and remain in office thus varies a great deal—but it is usually low.

4. Failure to pay attention to political context

“Environment” is not a policy arena that exists in a vacuum. Neither is Amazônia, its deforestation, or its development. Understanding what is going on with regard to the Amazon requires paying attention to two relevant dimensions: (a) activities and dynamics in areas that are politically linked to some aspect of forest conservation—that is, linked in *political space*, and (b) items and dynamics on the relevant political agenda (national, regional, international)—that is, linked in *political time*. What is important here is the perceptual linkage, not that the relationship in reality bears any resemblance to the perception.

The debate over agrarian reform in the Brazilian Constituent Assembly is a perfect example of the former. For landowners in the Amazon, the possibility of expropriation caused them to speed up deforestation on their properties to demonstrate that land was being prepared for productive use as pasture. Land reform and conflict over land tenure have been among the issues most consistently linked with deforestation in Brazil, just as climate change and indigenous peoples are the policy areas most consistently linked with Amazônia outside of Brazil—especially in the United States.

Brazilians, on the other hand, have always believed that foreigners think of Amazônia primarily in terms of its purportedly vast mineral wealth and potential hydroelectric power. Although it must have some, it is not clear how much of an impact multinational involvement in the region has on U.S. foreign policy positions on Amazônia. Nonetheless, Brazilian

politicians and some diplomatic personnel continue to insist that the U.S. government is not really serious when it takes conservationist positions and that these positions are essentially a front for U.S. multinationals.

Besides being aware of how their motivations are perceived, conservationists working in the Amazon need to be more aware of how other policy areas affect the ones that most concern them. This need has become abundantly clear with regard to land and energy policy. Other policy areas—for example, the expansion of the highway network being undertaken as part of the federal government’s “Avança 2000” infrastructure development program—have even greater potential for disruption. Where roads are built in previously undisturbed areas, ecological processes are disrupted and/or destroyed, and settlements inevitably follow. With its focus on privatizing infrastructure development wherever possible, current Brazilian government policy provides a degree of insulation for economic actors from the constraints of environmental regulation.

Political time is also an important factor: environmentalists have always had to seize what political opportunities become available to accomplish reforms. Institutional capacity has tended to develop in the wake of major events—such as the 1972 Stockholm conference or the intense international focus on global environmental issues in the second half of the 1980s. Most people expected another such flurry of capacity-building in the wake of the Earth Summit in 1992, and Brazilian environmental and social change organizations mobilized for two years prior to that conference to build for just such an eventuality.

5. Money is the main problem, and “capacity building” is the solution to weakness of environmental protection institutions

The usual version of this argument is that the money to establish, maintain, and monitor conservation units is simply not available. There is a good bit of truth in this statement. However, if money were the main obstacle, then a big push on fund-raising by conservation organizations (coupled with other instruments such as debt-for-nature swaps and foreign assistance by sympathetic governments) should resolve the problem. When it does not do so, the failure is often attributed to “lack of technical capacity” or “lack of institutional capacity” on the part of the agencies charged with establishing and/or running conservation units.

But capacity has to be measured relatively and absolutely. If an environmental agency is short on money or technical capacity, is it equally true that the transport or public works secretariats lack these things? In fact, governments make choices about where to allocate existing capacity, and the choices are political. Governments must be convinced that protection of the landscape ought to be a priority expenditure before they will make it one. It is therefore impossible to separate the question of adequate funding or capacity from the need for the political will to use money for conservation purposes. In the absence of the latter, no amount of money or skill will make much of a difference.

Abundance (especially sudden abundance) of money or technical expertise can cause as many problems as its lack. Both non-governmental and governmental organizations can quickly become intoxicated with easy money from outside. The fact that the budgetary cycles of both the funders and the funded (in the case of governments) produce boom and bust periods in which recipients go for long periods waiting for money to arrive (and then are constrained to spend their windfalls before a predetermined deadline) is particularly noxious in this respect.


CONCLUSION

It is easy to despair after reviewing the last thirty years of history of the Amazon region. Conservationists have found victories difficult to win and even harder to sustain. Politics and political context *always* play an important role in decisions about the region, and those who want to affect those decisions ignore that context at their peril.

Brazilian conservation success stories confirm this lesson. Consider, for example, the case of the Brazilian state of Acre, where those who wanted to keep the forest standing were part of—and helped to create—a substantial coalition that opposed predatory land uses at the same time as it opposed predatory politicians. That movement eventually succeeded in electing people who supported these goals to high office—mayor of the state capital, then governor and senator. Under those circumstances, the terms of the equation may begin to change.

But to sustain that change, there must be support from outside of Amazônia, and especially from Brasília. We are once again witnessing a shift in the political context and the agenda on which Amazônia appears. In Amapá, where a similarly well-intentioned governor attempted to face down a state legislature permeated with drug money, the legislators were able to create a prolonged stalemate with little more than verbal opposition from Brasília. Although the ubiquity of drug-related activities has been known in the region for at least a decade, only recently has it been admitted officially as a national security problem.

Over the last three years, the rate of deforestation in the Amazon has crept up again. Between August 1999 and August 2000, 19,000 square kilometers of forest were deforested—the second most destructive year of this decade after 1995 (Schwartz, 2001). That amounts to the size of a football field every eight seconds. The story is achingly familiar. Under pressure from soybean producers to provide a cheaper outlet to the sea, the Ministries of Planning and Transportation (without consulting the Ministry for the Environment) agreed to pave the unpaved part of Highway BR-163 between Brasília and Santarem in the state of Pará. The currently unpaved part of the highway cuts through the Tapajos forest reserve and other vulnerable sections of forest. At the same time, under pressure from the landless movement, the government has increased the number of new small farmer settlements in the region. These settlers, in turn, use fire to clear their land, and the frontier advances. Along with loggers, settlers are likely to move along the paved roads, until they are bought out by the ubiquitous cattle ranchers. The combination of paved roads, settlers, and extractors (of minerals or of timber) is one the region has seen many times before.

As each cycle of destruction runs its course, new instruments have been created to make sure that there would not be another like it. The environment ministry and its congressional allies have called the move to pave BR-163 illegal—as any such large undertaking must, by law, have an environmental impact assessment. Whether they are strong enough to prevail against far stronger pressure from the road's proponents remains to be seen. 

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