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Amazon Destruction Study Prompts Brazil Congress to Pass Environment Law

by LADB Staff

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On Jan. 26, after a year-long delay, the Brazilian Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE) finally released a study on the Amazon that showed widespread destruction of the rain forest. Two days later, Congress passed an environmental-protection bill that includes prison sentences and hefty fines for destructive practices.

Meanwhile, projects promoting "sustainable logging" raise more questions about the future of the rain forest. South America's vast Amazon basin is home to numerous Indian tribes and contains the world's largest collection of plant and animal species, many of which have yet to be studied for their potential medicinal, nutritional, or ecological value. The basin also accounts for 20% of the world's fresh water supply. Two-thirds of the Amazon is in Brazil, with 8.5 million sq km covering half the country, an area larger than Western Europe. More than 10% of Brazil's Amazon has disappeared since the Portuguese arrived 500 years ago (see NotiSur, 10/17/97 and 11/07/97).

The INPE study, which confirms many of environmentalists' worst fears, was based in part on satellite information. Destruction nearly tripled between the 1990-91 and 1994-95 burning seasons, surpassing the deforestation that set off an international outcry in the 1980s. "We are shocked to see that the rate of forest loss is now even worse than the late 1980s," said Sarah Tyack, rain forest campaigner for Friends of the Earth. More than 29,059 sq km of rain forest was destroyed in the 1994-95 burning season an area larger than New Jersey followed by 18,161 sq km in 1996, and 13,037 sq km in 1997.

Perhaps most alarming, the recent slowdown was brought about largely by heavy rainfall in the region rather than government policy. "These numbers are no reason to celebrate," said Brazil's Environment Minister Gustavo Krause. "This shows the situation was not under control as the government kept insisting over the last two years," said Garo Batmanian, head of the Brazilian office of the World Wildlife Fund. Eduardo Martins, president of the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e Recursos Naturais (IBAMA), said the main cause of the destruction was the burning and logging of huge tracts of land to create grazing pastures for livestock. "The government will spare no efforts to strengthen its commitment to reduce the deforestation," said Martins. "It will intensify its monitoring, control, and inspection of the region."

At the same time, he said, the government cannot ignore the need to develop the region and improve the quality of life for its 20 million people. But Joao Paulo Capobianco of the Sao Paulo nongovernmental Social-Environmental Institute said the worst offenders are no longer small farmers but the logging industry. Foreign loggers, mostly from Asia, invested US\$100 million in the region in 1997 alone.

Some teeth removed from new law

On Jan. 28, Congress approved the bill giving the federal environmental agency legal authority to enforce environmental- protection laws. The bill, which languished in Congress for seven years, grants the agency the authority to impose fines, prosecute polluters, and order companies to correct damage they cause. The bill establishes penalties of up to five years in prison and fines up to US \$44.5 million. A Senate version of the bill, passed last July, was praised by environmentalists as a model of protection, but key provisions were removed just before the vote, significantly weakening the bill.

Critics say the government caved in to pressure from the private sector, eliminating or softening penalties against companies that harm the environment. "Clearly it's a long overdue step for the Brazilian government to give its environmental agency statutory authority, but the way they're doing it loosening the laws, giving away the farm to the special interests is going to make it very difficult for Brazil to effectively prosecute multinational companies logging illegally," said Stephan Schwartzman with the Washington-based Environmental Defense Fund.

Government's "sustainable logging" policy questioned

Authorities in Brazil's largest state, Amazonas, said in late January they have suspended new projects by Asian logging companies, although it will mean the loss of millions of dollars in investment in the state. They said Chinese and Malaysian companies had bought up land and were indiscriminately cutting down rare species of hardwood, such as mahogany.

On Feb. 3, IBAMA announced the creation of seven new national forests in the Amazon to foster "sustainable logging" and slow the rate of rain-forest destruction. The presidential decree turns 2.7 million hectares of public land into areas that the government may lease to loggers, the IBAMA statement said. "With the decree...the government hopes to discourage the purchase of private land in the Amazon and at the same time encourage state governments to create their own networks of public forests," said the statement. IBAMA hopes that by allowing logging companies to operate in publicly owned land, it can better monitor the industry. A government report leaked last year said 80% of the timber trade in the Amazon region is illegal.

IBAMA said the seven new forests increased the area of national forests in the Amazon to about 15 million ha, half the area it calculates is needed to meet national and international demand for timber. Six of the new forests are in Para state, where logging has already destroyed large areas of rain forest. The seventh is in the relatively untouched Amazonas state. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) welcomed Brazil's move. "The creation of the new national forests is positive," said WWF spokesman Paulo Lyra. "It is much easier to manage these lands than private areas."

On Feb. 4, the government approved the first sustainable logging project on indigenous land in the Amazon. The project will eventually permit the Xikrin tribe to selectively log an area equivalent to 9% of its reservation in the state of Para over a period of 40 years. The government hopes to promote sustainable logging as one of several measures to slow deforestation in the Amazon. IBAMA faces a twofold cultural challenge: to understand the values and traditions of the Xikrin and to introduce a functional model of sustainable management in an area scarred by years of large-scale commercial

exploration. "This project is of special importance to us because it represents the first time there will be sustainable management of a forest in an indigenous area," said World Bank regional director Gobind Nankani.

The World Bank and recently privatized Brazilian mining giant Companhia Vale do Rio Doce are investing US\$400,000 in the pilot program to log and sell a variety of valuable tropical hardwoods. One aim of the program is to market less popular varieties of timber. But Isabelle Giannini of the Social-Environmental Institute was only cautiously optimistic about the success of the venture, pointing out that it is new territory for most of the parties involved and Brazil has little experience in sustainable logging.

While the World Bank is promoting sustainable or "low-impact" logging, critics say the bank ignores analysts who question whether sustainable logging is possible and overlooks the harmful consequences of its policies and investments on the world's forests. "The bank is pushing the notion of sustainable logging by transnational corporations, but it has yet to produce evidence that such a thing can even exist in primary tropical rain forests," said Randall Hayes, president of the Rainforest Action Network (RAN). [Sources: The Miami Herald, 01/27/98; BBC, The New York Times, 01/27/98, 01/29/98; CNN, 01/28/98, 01/29/98; Inter Press Service, 01/07/98, 01/27/98, 01/29/98, 01/30/98; Reuter, 01/27/98, 02/03/98, 02/04/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/27/98, 02/04/98]

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