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## **Brazil, World Wildlife Fund, World Bank Reach Accord to Save Amazon**

by LADB Staff

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The Brazilian government announced April 29 it will establish a protected area the size of Britain in the Amazon, with the help of the World Bank and the environmental organization World Wildlife Fund (WWF). But some environmentalists question whether the project will receive sufficient funding or be enforceable. "This decision will help preserve the abundant biodiversity in this remarkable tropical region," said James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank. "It is a true gift to the Brazilian people and to the world."

The announcement follows months of devastating fires that destroyed about 40,000 sq km of savanna and rain forest in the Brazilian Amazon and called attention to increasing deterioration of the rain forest (see NotiSur, 04/24/98). President Fernando Henrique Cardoso pledged to bring 25 million hectares under full protection by 2000 and, in addition, to introduce "sustainable management," which includes "low-impact logging," on 200 million ha by 2005.

In launching this project, Cardoso signed decrees for two new protected areas in the Brazilian Amazon and two in the Atlantic Forest, totaling almost 600,000 ha. Cardoso pledged to name additional tracts for conservation soon. "This is a testament of our commitment to preserve the environment for the benefit of our people," Cardoso said. "I sincerely hope the steps we are taking will encourage other countries to do the same."

The 25 million ha protected area is the first result of the World Bank-WWF effort to set aside an ecologically representative network of forests around the world. This project alone would meet half their goal to protect 10% of the world's remaining forests by 2000. Today only 4% of the Brazilian Amazon forest is protected, although another 16% is part of Indian reserves.

The Amazon region, roughly the size of Western Europe, is home to one-tenth of the world's plant and animal species and contains some of the planet's most important tropical habitats. Contamination, overexploitation, and agriculture have already destroyed nearly two-thirds of the Earth's original forests. The WWF says 94% of the remainder is unprotected and disappearing at about .5 ha per second.

### ***Feasibility of project questioned***

Amid the enthusiastic praise for the project, several questions remain, including funding. Just establishing the protected sites will require between US\$90 million and US\$125 million, and a still undetermined amount will be needed to maintain the protected areas.

So far, conservationists have only obtained US\$720,000 in funding commitments, said Robert Buschbacher, WWF's program director in Brazil. The Brazilian government and the Global

Environment Facility (GEF), a multiagency consortium dominated by the World Bank, each committed US\$300,000, and the WWF another US\$120,000. "The World Bank stands ready to support and finance whatever is necessary" to meet the alliance's goals, said Wolfensohn. "But it's not prepared to provide a blank check." The fate of people living in areas to be brought under "full" protection also has to be worked out. Sites previously designated as indigenous peoples' reserves will not be affected by the new effort, but any other communities in the protected areas could be made to move.

Even sponsors of the Amazon project acknowledge that carrying it out will be a challenge for Brazil, which has been trying to strengthen enforcement of existing conservation laws in the face of enormous pressures from industries like logging, farming, mining, and grazing as well as by the demands of millions of landless campesinos. "We are concerned that in so many countries protected areas have been established without any real protection," said Claude Martin, WWF director general. "They exist on paper, but not in reality."

Nigel Sizer, a senior associate at the World Resources Institute and an expert on Amazonian forests, called the pledge significant but no panacea. "By itself, it will not significantly reduce the rate of deforestation going on in the region, especially on the frontiers," Sizer said. "The root causes of accelerating deforestation are not addressed."

Another sticky political issue is which independent group will ensure that "sustainable management" is practiced on the land set aside for controlled exploitation. The Bank/WWF alliance has adopted a four-page list of criteria for certifying that logging operations are in compliance with local laws and international environmental principles.

Alliance officials said the only independent group capable of such monitoring is the Mexico-based Forest Stewardship Council, set up by the 1992 UN Earth Summit to monitor the international logging industry. Timber executives, however, who have been working with Wolfensohn since January to develop voluntary industry standards for "low-impact logging," oppose the council's involvement. They argue that they should certify their own operations a practice whose failure led to the creation of the council.

The World Bank will either have to persuade the companies to accept council certification or persuade environmentalists- -including WWF that another group could adequately monitor the industry.

### *An opportunity to change negative image*

The Amazon project gives the World Bank a chance to repair some of the damage to its image caused by numerous questionable projects it has funded. After mounting evidence that World Bank projects during the 1980s caused environmental and social damage in the Brazilian Amazon, in 1992 the bank approved a US\$167 million loan for natural-resource management and environmental protection in Rondonia state.

But last year, the bank's independent inspection team found that, under the project, deforestation reached "historically high levels" of nearly 450,000 ha per year. That was only one incident

where the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and governments were financing environmentally harmful projects in the region, said Steve Schwartzman, an anthropologist with the Environmental Defense Fund. Other questionable projects include a highway from Manaus in northern Brazil to Venezuela's Caribbean coast and the Bolivia-Brazil gas pipeline, which runs through the Amazon.

Wolfensohn has highlighted the damage done by poor settlers moving into the Amazon as a leading cause of deforestation. Many poor settlers entered forested areas on roads built by logging companies and settled in areas already logged by the corporations. Bank inspectors last year found that illegal loggers primarily timber companies but also migrant workers and their families were responsible for as much as 90% of the forest loss in the area of the Rondonia project.

Nongovernmental organizations are concerned that the bank, which is reviewing a 1991 policy that bars it from financing logging in tropical rain forests, is trying to support new projects under the guise of "sustainable logging." "I'm not trying to get into tropical forests. The point is to protect the forests," said Wolfensohn. "Some NGOs will never believe that. I'm as interested as they are in having my children grow up in a good world." (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, Inter Press Service, Reuters, Xinhua, 04/29/98; The Miami Herald, The New York Times, 04/30/98)

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