



Brazil: Cutting Trees for China Threatens Amazon Rain Forest

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View of the landscape from the BR163 highway, in Brazil's Para state in the Amazon rain forest, Sept. 4, 2019.

Western media reporting on Brazil recently has focused on President Jair Bolsonaro's dismissal of the coronavirus outbreak there as just "a little cold."

But what *The Economist* magazine called Bolsonaro's "insouciance" regarding threats to Brazil's Amazon rain forest may demand equal media attention in the long run.

Brazilian farmers' slash-and-burn clearing of parts of the Amazon rain forest for agricultural purposes has become a concern for environmentalists. The farmers plant much of their tree-cleared land with soybeans destined for export to China.

Some farmers are also clearing forest areas for cattle ranching to meet China's growing demand for beef.

Another big story in the end may be China's role in importing timber from the world's largest tropical rain forest, a major undertaking that could result in a significant increase in carbon emissions from Latin America's largest country. The trees are currently playing a positive role in absorbing some of the carbon dioxide emissions that are driving global warming.

China is importing timber from Brazil at a rate that may turn out to have a huge impact on many Brazilians—and on the world, environmentalists say.

China is the world's largest importer of timber, so Brazil is not the only country where timber is being extracted for Chinese usage. But Brazil has drawn attention because of the impact that a major loss of trees can have on climate change.

As of 2018, China had become the world's largest timber importer followed by the United States, the European Union, and Japan.

Rain forest fires

Writers Heriberto Araujo and Melissa Chan described recently how Brazil drew international attention in August 2019 with a surge of rain forest fires.

"The increased rates of fire counts in 2019 led to international concern about the state of the rain forest..." they said in an article published in *The Atlantic* magazine through a collaboration between the magazine and the Pulitzer Center in Washington.

French President Emmanuel Macron, meanwhile, called on President Bolsonaro to take better care of what the *Christian Science Monitor* has called "the world's most important forest."

Bolsonaro shot back, denouncing France for its "lamentable colonialist stance."

In August 2019, China publicly countered Western criticism of Brazil over its handling of the Amazon wildfires. According to the Associated Press, the Chinese ambassador to Brazil described the criticism as "a bit fabricated."

This led President Bolsonaro to thank China for making "a grand gesture that strengthened us a lot."

China's soy imports versus environmental pledges

Araujo and Chan report that "China's middle class has a growing hunger for meat" This has led to a demand for soy, which is used to feed China's hogs.

China's quest for food security, however, runs counter to its environmental pledges.

While the Paris Agreement on climate change aims to reduce carbon emissions, Araujo and Chan say, "It doesn't account for the activities and responsibilities of signatories in other countries."

President Bolsonaro has argued that the country must prioritize economic growth even it comes at the cost of damaging the planet's largest tropical rain forest.

According to Araujo and Chan, Bolsonaro has dismantled environmental protection laws, replaced dozens of Environment Ministry officials, and cut the budget for law enforcement in dense parts of the rain forest.

Bolsonaro has accused indigenous groups which are working to preserve the Amazon of "holding broader economic prosperity hostage."

Araujo and Chan hired a driver to take them into the Amazon region on a 2,800-mile-long highway that had once been a muddy dirt road. Bolsonaro sent the army in to complete new construction on the road.

Brazil has plans to build a railway that would parallel the road, which is called BR-163. The cross-country railway would reduce transportation costs for soy and other products by roughly 40 percent, and speed up deliveries to Brazil's ports, making the country more competitive against its main soy export rival, the United States.

But at an estimated cost of \$3.1 billion, Brazil has struggled to find investors in the railroad.

It now appears that some of the funding for the railroad will come from China, which late last year pledged to invest \$100 billion in Brazilian infrastructure and agribusiness projects.



Picture released by Brazil's State of Mato Grosso showing deforestation in the Amazon Credit: AFP

From China Skeptic to Partner with China

During an election in Brazil in 2018, Bolsonaro, a right-wing former army captain, spoke as a skeptic when it came to China.

In one notable statement, he said that “the Chinese are not buying in Brazil. They are buying Brazil.”

Mauricio Sanavo, a political scientist in Rio de Janeiro, said Bolsonaro was “the first president of Brazil after the return of democracy to speak of China in a very harsh way.”

A year later, Bolsonaro had switched to a pro-China stance.

An expert on Chinese engagement in Latin America who asked not to be named said that Bolsonaro’s shift has been based on economic realities.

“It shows how the lure of Chinese markets and China’s pursuit of projects to facilitate access to those markets—and work for its companies—is transforming the region,” the expert said in response to questions.

“Even Brazil with relatively strong institutions and commercial alternatives, is being significantly penetrated. Even China skeptic Jair Bolsonaro has been sold on the utility of working with China.”

He said that this became evident through rhetoric and promises made during a trip by Bolsonaro to China late last year.

Brazil now receives nearly half of China’s foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latin America while becoming Brazil’s largest trading partner, the analyst noted.

But to keep that in perspective, it's worth noting that U.S. firms also engage in significant levels of trade with Brazil, the region's biggest economy.

According to Heriberto Araujo and Melissa Chan, the American agricultural giant Cargill, based in Minnesota, runs its largest non-U.S. operations in Brazil.

But China is buying most of the soy products exported from Brazil along with half of its beef exports.

In the end, President Bolsonaro's political future may depend more on how he handles the coronavirus than how he deals with China or the Amazon rain forest.

So far, Bolsonaro has dismissed calls for a shutdown of businesses in Brazil, which some of his critics as well as supporters advocate as a means to protect against the coronavirus.

The U.S.-based *The Week* magazine reported recently that state governors in Brazil were defying Bolsonaro's demands that they rescind their coronavirus lockdowns and immediately restart the country's ailing economy.

He called several governors "job killers" and said that their restrictions on movement and commerce could result in social chaos.

The New York Times reported that in a national address on March 26, Bolsonaro, who is 65 and has been in office for a little more than a year, said that if he were to get the virus, he would recover easily because of his "athletic background."

While he spoke, Brazilians across the political spectrum in Rio de Janeiro were banging pots outside their windows in what has become a nightly protest against Bolsonaro's handling of the coronavirus, *The Times* reported from Rio de Janeiro.

As of April 5, Brazil had 10,475 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, including 448 recorded deaths.

Experts say that because Brazil has high poverty rates, with many people living in close quarters, it could be highly vulnerable to the virus. The death toll could escalate rapidly.

With a total population of more than 212 million people, Brazil is the most heavily populated nation in South America. More than 80 percent of its people live in urban areas.

Farmers caught in the middle

Some accounts of the rising tensions between developers and conservationists in Brazil have failed to include the voices of farmers and cattle ranchers working in and near the Amazon rain forest.

The Christian Science Monitor Weekly has filled this gap by publishing a cover story recently that includes interviews with a number of Brazilian farmers.

Not all of them are bent on slashing and burning in the rain forest in order to expand their farmland. Some are trying to preserve parts of the rain forest, grow more trees, and engage in what's called green cattle-ranching.

Cattle ranching is reported to be responsible for up to 80 percent of the deforestation in the Amazon, according to Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

But many cattle ranchers as well as farmers feel that they're caught in the middle between environmental activists and Brazil's ascendant economic development advocates.

The *Monitor* story was written by Sara Miller Llana based on her reporting from the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso and published on March 30.

Llana reports that in the past Brazil was a global model in forest preservation. The government maintains an environmental registry that shows who owns each piece of land and uses satellite imaging to monitor deforestation.

But with deforestation increasing and Bolsonaro pushing development, "many say more vigilance is needed—especially in the beef industry," she says.

On the positive side, Llana reports that a sustainable cattle-ranching group called Pecsá, has been able to produce meat using more than 80 percent less land and emitting 85 percent fewer greenhouse gases than beef produced on conventional ranches.

Pecsá, which in Portuguese stands for Sustainable Cattle Ranching in the Amazon, is private company spun off from an NGO that seeks to turn degraded pastures into efficient operations without using a single acre of forest, even as the demand for beef from China continues to soar.

But Llana says that today, tensions between development and conservation supporters have never been greater, and especially since the election of Bolsonaro in 2018.

Llana says the issue of deforestation in the Amazon "comes at a time when the sense of urgency about climate change has reached a historic high, with many people looking at the preservation of the world's largest tropical rainforest—and its ability to extract heat-trapping gases from the atmosphere—as crucial to the planet's survival."

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