
Brazil: Aggravated deforestation rates in Amazonian forests

An independent scientific investigation carried out by a research team of U.S. and Brazilian scientists led by William Laurance of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, has provided compelling evidence that rates of forest destruction in the Brazilian Amazon have accelerated sharply since 1995, returning to the catastrophic levels of the 1970s and 1980s. The research opposes the claims of the Brazilian government that threats to Amazonian forests have fallen in recent years because of improved environmental laws and public attitudes. "Forest destruction from 1995 to 2000 averaged almost two million hectares a year ... equivalent to seven football field(s) a minute," said team leader William Laurance.

The study has been recently published in the scientific journal "Environmental Conservation" (William F. Laurance, Ana K. M. Albernaz, and Carlos Da Costa. 2001. Is deforestation accelerating in the Brazilian Amazon? *Environmental Conservation* 28:305-311) and analysed deforestation estimates produced by Brazil's National Space Agency that were based on detailed satellite images of the Amazon since 1978.

Its findings are important because the Brazilian government plans to invest over \$40 billion in new highways, railroads, hydroelectric reservoirs, power lines, and gas lines in the Amazon over the next few years. About 5000 miles of highways will be paved. The government claims that these projects will have only limited effects on the Amazon. But the researchers assert these giant transportation and energy projects will have a tremendous impact on these important rainforests, initiating large-scale forest invasions by loggers, hunters, and slash-and-burn farmers. "There's no way you can criss-cross the basin with all these giant transportation and energy projects and not have a tremendous impact on the Amazon," says Laurance.

Although new environmental laws in Brazil are designed to slow forest loss, the research team claims that most laws are rarely enforced. This new scientific study clearly indicates that the threats to Amazonian forests are growing. "The scariest thing is that many of the highways and infrastructure projects will penetrate right into the pristine heart of the Amazon," says Laurance. "That could increase forest loss and fragmentation on an unprecedented scale."

Article based on information from: Forest Conservation News Today, Glen Barry, January 17, 2002, e-mail: gbarry@forests.org , <http://forests.org> ; Smithsonian Institution, "Smithsonian Researchers Show Amazonian Deforestation Accelerating",