
Amazon: Destruction by logging and fires continues

Deforestation and widespread burning of the vast Amazon rainforest are on the rise and air quality in the region is suffering. According to satellite data, burnings in the region -whose consequences are similar to those that affected Southeast Asia- are up 28% since last year; combined with logging, about 5,800 square miles of land are deforested each year. Deforestation figures for 1994 -the most recent officially available- show a 34 percent increase since 1991. Another 4,200 square miles are thinned out due to logging alone. But there is more: a recent study performed by the Woods Hole Research Center and the Amazon Environmental Research Institute estimated that for every acre that shows up as cleared and burned in satellite images, another partly burned or logged acre goes undetected beneath the forest canopy. Logging promotes a dried environment what creates conditions for burning.

"Deforestation has done nothing but go up," said Stephen Schwartzman of the Environmental Defense Fund. "Where the most money has gone is where the fires have increased the most." The group noted that half the fires recorded this year were in Mato Grosso, where the World Bank lent \$205 million to save the rain forest in a natural resource management program. A report by the EDF warned the Amazon "may be edging closer to catastrophic fire events," and predicted "potentially enormous global consequences".

Actions of the Brazilian Environmental Protection Agency (IBAMA) to protect the Amazon are feeble and sometimes contradictory with other official agencies' policies. The pace of destruction appears to be dictated more by the marketplace -represented by powerful national and foreign agents- than by any government measure. A bill to strengthen IBAMA, stalled in Congress since 1991, passed the Senate this year and it is now idling in the House, where the Brazilian Federation of Industries is lobbying against it, on the ground that threats of cash fines and prison will open the way for corruption. Besides, the demand in Europe and the United States for hardwoods like mahogany, used for furniture, has promoted large illegal logging operations throughout the Amazon. As stated in WRM Bulletin nr. 5 (16/10/97) about 80 percent of all logging in the Amazon is illegal.

Sources: D.J. Schemo, New York Times, 2/11/1997; The Gallon Environment Letter, 18/11/1997; Kenneth Walsh, EDF, 3/12/1997.