
How the COPs and carbon markets are fueling more fires in the Amazon

With one year to go until the 30th United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP30) on Climate Change in Belém, in the Brazilian state of Pará —the first to be held in a tropical forest region— the Amazon is facing serious crises. In 2024, in addition to the worst drought ever, forest fires are also among the most severe in history. This year, Brazil is leading the forest fire ranking in Latin America. By November 17, 256,445 fires had been detected in Brazil, followed by 89,400 in Bolivia and 40,994 in Venezuela. One of Brazil's most affected states is Pará, whose capital city is Belém. By November, the state had had 48,842 fires in 2024, second only to the state of Mato Grosso (49,969). (1)

Many territories have been affected by fire in Pará. For example, some 70km from Belém, the Anambé Indigenous Land has had more than half its area destroyed by fire in less than a month. The Anambé community had to camp out on the edge of their territory, and cope with scarce food and water. (2) Not far from there, in the Acará River Valley, quilombolas from the AMARQUALTA association and Tembé indigenous people also asked for help.

At least three factors explain this tragedy that has been devastating so many territories.

One factor was recently revealed by the Brazilian coalition Agro é Fogo, upon denouncing the fact that **more than 70% of the budget of the main federal agency tasked with fighting fires has not been set aside or executed.** (3) This is consistent with the appeals and denouncements made by peoples impacted by the absence of the State – federal and state governments – when it comes to firefighting, thus putting at risk the lives of many affected people. For them, trying to contain the fires on their own account is what remains.

The second and most important factor related to forest fires has been revealed in an in-depth analysis by the Agro é Fogo coalition. This results from academic studies connected with the lived experiences of communities that depend on the forest and other biomes, like Cerrado and Pantanal. The analysis shows that one is not dealing with a lamentable misfortune or an environmental-climatic problem. Rather, **“forest fires and deforestation are tools to consolidate the land grabbing that goes hand-in-hand with the expansion of the capitalist agricultural frontier into the territories of indigenous peoples and traditional communities”.** (4) Above all, it is one of the consequences of the expansion of agribusiness, ex-president Jair Bolsonaro's key support base, with strong representation in Brazil's National Congress and current government.

The third factor is **the priority given by the authorities to the carbon market, heralded as the main way to save the Amazon and firmly rooted in an international agenda.** In September, for instance, Pará's governor signed in New York an agreement worth USD 180 million in carbon credit sales from the state forest carbon program. He was harshly criticized by 38 peoples, traditional communities and partner organizations in a letter denouncing the absence of the “broad participation” he claims to have taken place. (5) The governor also attended COP29, where he was able to celebrate the approval of rules for the carbon market on the same week when the Brazilian Senate passed a bill to regulate the domestic carbon market. (6)

REDD+ and the COPs: legitimizing and intensifying oil use

Since their introduction in 2007, REDD (Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) projects and programs have shown that the promises to save the forest and mitigate climate change are lies. (7) In essence, the main purpose of carbon credits has been to legitimize and intensify the use of oil and other fossil fuels, which is accompanied by impacts on populations at the places of extraction.

In other words, the conversation about forest carbon is fundamentally about oil. For this reason, COPs have more and more become corporate gatherings, chiefly attended by representatives of corporations and lobbyists for the fossil fuel sector. At COP29 in Baku there were 1773 representatives of the sector, a figure likely to recur at COP30. This amounts to more than the number of delegates sent by the ten countries most threatened by climate change combined. (8)

As well as being fundamental to the carbon market, the Amazon region is also in the crosshairs of the oil industry. According to the Amazon Fossil-Free Monitor, more than one million square kilometers in the region are part of areas where there is some stage of oil exploration going on. (9) The initiative also shows that 101 projects funded by the Amazon Fund, Brazil's largest REDD+ program, are in areas of oil exploration, of which 77 inside Amazônia Legal, leading to more destruction. A proposal attracting major attention is the one made by the Brazilian government to use Petrobrás to explore the Equatorial Margin. This very company has become one of the main backers of the Amazon Fund. (10)

But the oil industry is not the only sector that destroys the forest and benefits from the carbon market. There also are other initiatives that hide behind friendly terms. One example is the 'bioeconomy', conceived by the Pará state government and its partner TNC, a conservationist NGO from the USA. Despite these actors' propaganda, the populations that have experienced it in practice do not notice any difference between the bioeconomy and the 'old economy' that has devastated the Amazon region, persecuting and massacring its inhabitants.

A recent case in point: on November 5, members of the Turiwara-Tembê People from Alto Acará, 150km away from Belém, were violently expelled by the police from an area of their traditional territory that they had re-occupied. The police followed orders issued by a Pará state judge, who sided with a dendê palm oil and 'bioeconomy' company called Agropalma, which claimed that the indigenous people had 'invaded' its land. (11) Since 2021, in partnership with a company called Biofíllica, Agropalma has imposed a REDD+ project on the traditional territory of the Turiwara-Tembê People and the forest that remains on it. This project considers the Turiwara-Tembê People – and not Agropalma – as the cause of deforestation, blaming indigenous people for a problem they did not create. Agropalma has relied on other 'partner' NGOs, like US-based Conservation International and the Earthworm Foundation, to conduct its macabre policy of 'conservation' and oppression. (12)

Another battle is being fought 350km away from Belém by the Ka'apor People. They are seeking to defend their territory and the forest from an invasion by Wildlife Works, the world's largest REDD project private company. This company began establishing a REDD project with the consent of just one association that does not represent all the Ka'apor People and territory. For this reason, on October 30, through their political representation organization *Tuxa Ta Pame*, the Ka'apor filed a lawsuit against Wildlife Works, denouncing a series of illegalities and abuses perpetrated by this

company among the Ka'apor, and calling for its immediate removal from the territory. (13)

While carbon programs sow confusion, division, violence and persecution among communities that depend on the forest, they do not prevent the advance of agribusiness, directly and indirectly benefitting the corporations that control this sector, most of which are international. Walmart, for instance, launched a new initiative in Mato Grosso – a state devastated by the advance of agribusiness – based on carbon credits. It provides incentives for forest recovery and maintenance, something that theoretically should already be an obligation of the sector. (14)

Hence, by deflecting attention away from the real causes of deforestation and from the reality faced by Amazonian communities, the forest carbon market – and also the COPs, by validating it – ends up being an underlying cause of deforestation. When one adds in the interest of agribusiness in expanding across the Amazon region and the lack of state resources to combat fires, the result is evident: more fire and destruction of forests.

(1) <https://terrabrasilis.dpi.inpe.br/> Data from January 1 to November 18, 2024.

(2)

<https://www.mpf.mp.br/pa/sala-de-imprensa/noticias-pa/fogo-destroi-mais-da-metade-da-terra-indigena-anambe-pa-e-mpf-questiona-orgaos-sobre-medidas-adotadas>

(3) <https://agroefogo.org.br/blog/2024/10/09/nota-publica-queimadas-nos-territorios/>

(4)

<https://www.wrm.org.uy/pt/artigos-do-boletim/agro-e-fogo-grilagens-desmatamento-e-incendios-na-amazonia-cerrado-e-pantanal>

(5)

<https://terradedireitos.org.br/noticias/noticias/povos-tradicionais-cobram-consulta-previa-sobre-contrato-bilionario-de-creditos-de-carbono-no-para/24072>

(6) <https://agenciagov.ebc.com.br/noticias/202411/cop29-comeca-no-azerbaijao-com-acordo-sobre-mercado-de-carbono-global>

(7) <https://www.wrm.org.uy/pt/publicacoes/15-anos-de-REDD>

(8)

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/fossil-fuel-lobbyists-eclipse-delegations-most-climate-vulnerable-nations-cop29-climate-talks/>

(9) <https://monitor.en.amazonialivredepetroleo.org/>

(10) <https://agencia.petrobras.com.br/w/sustentabilidade/petrobras-e-bndes-fazem-nova-parceria-para-restauracao-ecologica-na-amazonia>

(11) https://g1.globo.com/pa/para/noticia/2024/11/05/pms-e-indigenas-entram-em-conflito-em-acao-d-e-retirada-de-comunidade-de-fazenda-controlada-por-empresa-de-oleo-de-palma-no-para.ghtml?utm_source=whatsapp&utm_medium=share-bar-mobile&utm_campaign=materias

(12) <http://novacartografiasocial.com.br/lancamento-do-dossie-indigenas-turiwara-tembe-no-alto-rio-acara-conflitos-etnicos-e-territoriais/>

(13) [Petition by the Ka'apor filed before Federal Court in the state of Maranhão](#)

(14) <https://www.qcintel.com/carbon/article/brazilian-state-partners-with-walmart-ngo-to-advance-jredd-31586.html>

