



Deforestation at a Record High Level in Brazil: Indigenous Tribes at Risk

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Brazil set a new record for deforestation in the Amazon rainforest just three months into 2022. Deforestation often occurs through intentional fires, ignited for agricultural purposes. In Brazil, agriculture is a big industry, so deforestation is a common practice in the Amazon. INPE, a national space research agency, has shown that since 2015, an area of forest larger than New York City has disappeared. Their data further shows that from January 2022 to March 2022, deforestation increased 64% compared to the same period one year ago.

While deforestation is beneficial for the short-term agricultural economy, there are no long-term benefits; rather, deforestation causes harm to native populations. According to The Borgen Project, deforestation is correlated with increased disease due to air pollution. Additionally, deforestation depletes natural resources, which raises issues of food insecurity for indigenous tribes who lead their lives in tandem with the Amazon. Given the damage thus far, in combination with a bleak-looking future, both preventative and responsive actions need to be taken against deforestation in the Amazon. Unfortunately, the current government in Brazil is working against environmental protection laws.

This deforestation spike is especially concerning because it comes during the Amazon's rainy season. Traditionally, deforestation peaks in the dry season (July through October) when trees are easier to burn. Raoni Rajao, a professor of

environmental management at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, told Al Jazeera, “The fact that we are already at a record high and actually [seeing] numbers that are usually to be expected mid-year...is indeed worrying.”

The current deforestation peak reflects the increasing environmental neglect of Brazil’s government since President Jair Bolsonaro took office in 2019. At the time, he vowed to reduce deforestation practices. However, Bolsonaro’s actions have not reflected these promises. Bolsonaro weakened environmental protections, claiming that they inhibit economic growth, and instead called for increased mining and commercial farming: two huge polluting industries. According to Cristiane Mazzetti, a Greenpeace forest campaigner, the Brazil government acts “deliberately against the necessary steps to limit climate change.”

The Amazon River people that live alongside the river banks of the Amazon, the Ribereño, experience the impacts of Bolsonaro’s neglect deeply. This community adapted to its surroundings, developing food and water supply systems that rely on the Amazon river and rainforest. The Ribereño learned to use the Amazon’s resources sustainably. As the rainforest disappears, so do these resources. As a result, Indigenous tribes are at risk of food insecurity as hunting and fishing become increasingly challenging. Further, deforestation has a link to pesticide-contaminated water, according to The Borgen Project – Bolsonaro is causing pollution of the Indigenous people’s water.

In addition to food insecurity and water pollution, the Ribereño are also besieged from the air. Forest fires release carbon dioxide and fine particulate matter (PM 2.5), both of which are air-clogging pollutants. Air saturated with pollutants has been linked to respiratory issues, cardiovascular diseases, and premature death.

The Ribereño people are not the only tribe experiencing these effects. According to Al Jazeera, 100 Indigenous tribes in the capital of Brasilia are voicing their opinions against the government’s cruel neglect and impact on their lifestyles. Al Jazeera’s Monica Yanakiew reported, “[The tribes are] protesting to make sure that Congress will not approve bills that have been pushed by the government to make it easier to exploit the Amazon [rain]forest commercially.”

Bolsonaro continues to push for laws that facilitate further deforestation, and the Amazon river people will no longer stay quiet. Nevertheless, the Ribereños cannot fight this battle alone – they need public support. Professor Eve Bratman, an Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at Franklin & Marshall College, called for people to “keep the issue in the news. Support the organizations on the ground doing the work. It is important to be environmentally aware because it’s all of our future at stake.”

The more media attention this issue receives, the more change will happen in the prevention of fires, monitoring of air quality, or enforcement of air quality standards. Brazil has made international commitments to protect the Amazon, which they have subsequently ignored. Environmentalists need to make noise about the Amazon and force Bolsonaro to prioritize the deforestation issue at hand.

Sydney joined the team at the Organization for World Peace as a correspondent intern in the winter of 2022. She is currently a student at Oberlin College, where she studies journalism and environmental studies, with a focus in urban sustainability. Through writing for the OWP, Sydney is particularly interested in exploring environmental injustices, Middle Eastern conflicts, and issues of food insecurity.

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