

Deep in the Amazon, a bold question: Can the forest save itself?

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Brazilian officials have cordoned off a massive parcel of degraded land in the Amazon and leased it to a private carbon credit company to safeguard and restore.

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The vast forests of Altamira, Brazil, have historically suffered some of region's highest rates of deforestation. (Leo Correa/AP)

ALTAMIRA, Brazil — If much of the Amazon forest is to wither away, this is the town where that end was foretold.

During its campaign to develop the region, Brazil's former military dictatorship chose this distant outpost in 1970 to inaugurate its signature infrastructure project, the Trans-Amazonian Highway. The road, which carved a path across the belly of the forest, heralded an epoch of large-scale devastation that remade the Amazon. In local media, Altamira became known as the “champion of deforestation.”

Now Brazilian officials think this expansive municipality — which extends over a territory twice the size of Portugal — can also be the site of the forest's rebirth.

This year, the Pará state government set out to test a question that until now has largely been left to researchers: If left alone, can the Amazon forest restore itself? To test the hypothesis, officials cordoned off a degraded parcel of land here twice the size of Manhattan and, in March, leased it to a private carbon credit company to safeguard and restore.

Some of the task will be done by planting trees and natural flora. But most of the restoration job will be left to Mother Nature. It's called “passive restoration.”

“This is opening a new model that we think can serve as a beacon for Brazil,” said Helder Barbalho, the governor of Pará. “This is an important strategy that can replicated across the state.”

The search for solutions in the Amazon couldn't be more urgent. Rates of [deforestation](#) have been dropping since President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made combating environmental crime a priority of his government, but the destruction hasn't stopped. Nearly 6,300 square kilometers were lost last year, according to the [last official count](#),

bringing the biome closer to what scientists warn is a [tipping point](#), when the forest is no longer able to maintain its own rainy ecosystem and large swaths are transformed into degraded savannah.



Most of the restoration job will be left to Mother Nature. (Ana Mendes/For The Washington Post)

Signs of its arrival are already in abundance: dried riverbeds, forest fires, punishing droughts, increased tree mortality. Scientists have predicted the forest could experience a broad ecological collapse by 2050, when between 10 and 47 percent of the forest will “be exposed to compounding disturbances” that could “trigger unexpected ecosystem transitions,” according to a February 2024 study [in Nature](#).

But other research has also provided cause for hope. Despite the delicate nature of the Amazon’s ecosystem, the forest has also shown a robust capacity for regrowth. [A recent study showed](#) that roughly 72,000 square kilometers of the biome lost to deforestation are already in an advanced stage of natural regeneration. Much of the regenerated forest is in areas not threatened by agricultural production, a principal driver of deforestation, [additional research](#) found this year.

“The forest can come back,” said Andreia Pinto, an environmental researcher who has written several of the studies. “The scar of deforestation can be healed.”

Whether the wound reopens again is another question. Roughly 60 percent of regenerated forest is later deforested, [according to a study](#) last year by Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research.

The matter will be put to the test in a town synonymous with the Amazon's destruction.

"This is a really important symbol," Barbalho said.

The area where the pilot project will unfold, Triunfo do Xingu, has lost [more than a third](#) of its original forest since its creation as a government-protected area in 2006. During the administration of then-President Jair Bolsonaro, who inveighed against environmental law enforcement as an impediment to economic growth, the devastation widened.

But it was the freshness of the destruction that made the protected area an interesting candidate for this restoration model. The chance for natural regeneration, researchers say, is far greater in recently deforested areas.

For state officials, the first step was reclaiming the land. In 2022, authorities [arrested](#) a notorious cattle rancher whom they accused of being one of the Amazon's most prolific deforesters. They cleared out his farm and renamed the 100 square-kilometer plot a "unit of restoration" — a new jurisdictional definition. Then in March, hoping to create a new local economy based on environmentalism, the state put the parcel on the auction block for a carbon credit company to restore.

The plan is not without risk. Brazil's carbon credit industry, which seeks to protect the forest in exchange for credits that can be sold on international markets, [has been beset by scandal](#). Past projects have been accused of exaggerating environmental impact, improperly using government lands and creating divisions within Indigenous communities.

This project should sidestep many of those issues, said Raoni Rajão, a former senior official in Brazil's Environment Ministry, because it has government buy-in. And the land, which doesn't have any local inhabitants, will be patrolled by a private company paid to protect it.

"This is a good idea," Rajão said. "It could and should be repeated in other areas."

The initiative will be run by Systemica, a Brazilian carbon credit company that operates in the Amazon. In an interview, chief executive Munir Soares expressed optimism. He said deforesters often look for unprotected lands they can sell off with fraudulent paperwork. But the designation of this area as a restoration reserve, as well as the project itself — which he estimated would employ hundreds of locals — will reduce the criminal incentive.

"We're going to be present, day in and day out," Soares said.

If the land gets a chance to rest, locals said, they expect the forest to be reborn.

Raiumundo Freire, who harvests a mixture of forest products including açai and cacao, said he's witnessed the process himself. He first moved to the Triunfo do Xingu territory in 1986, when it was nothing but "dense forest." Much of it has been razed, he said, but he never lost hope it could be restored.

Years ago, Freire said, he bought a small parcel of land, just 37 hectares. It was totally deforested. He'd long put it to use planting corn and other vegetables.

"Then five years ago, I let it recover, didn't do anything," he said.

And now?

"It's just forest," he said.



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