

Pressures build on Amazon jungle

By Gary Duffy
BBC News, Brazil

The Amazon is not just a precious resource for Brazil but for the entire world, and the year ahead seems likely to produce important indications of what the future holds for this vast rainforest.

The scale of the challenge is widely acknowledged.

In the past 40 years, close to 20% of the Amazon has been cut down.

Land cleared for cattle is the leading cause of deforestation, while the growth in soya bean production is becoming increasingly significant. Illegal logging is also a factor.

Deforestation and forest fires are now responsible for nearly 75% of Brazil's greenhouse gas emissions.

In the past three years the Brazilian government has celebrated a 59% cut in the rate of deforestation, but there are now signs of problems ahead.

Fines

In December, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said there had been a 10% increase in deforestation between August and November 2007 and announced a range of measures to try to stem this.

I would easily say [2007] was one of the worst years I have seen in 11 years living here

John Carter,
director, Alianca da Terra

The president signed a decree imposing fines for buying or trading goods such as beef or soya planted illegally on deforested properties.

Several hundred federal police are to be sent to the area to help combat environmental destruction, joining more than 1,600 inspectors already there.

In recent years the government says it has carried out numerous inspections, seized more than one million cubic metres of wood, cancelled thousands of land registrations and arrested hundreds of people, as well as creating large conservation areas.

At the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Bali, Indonesia, last month, Brazil also announced the creation of a voluntary fund to protect the Amazon, due to be launched in 2008.

Growing concern

On a broader international front, it was also agreed at Bali that forest conservation would be included in discussions about a future agreement on global warming.

The new measures may be a sign of growing government concern, and it will only become clear in the months ahead just how effective they will prove to be in the struggle to protect the Amazon.

Environmental groups, while welcoming the government's efforts, say the response is simply not good enough.

Critics had already warned that recent falls in deforestation could be explained by a drop in market prices for products such as soya and meat, and that once these rose again land clearance would start to increase.

"We have a national plan to fight deforestation that, historically, was a good plan on paper but lacked implementation both due to political will and due to resources," said Marcelo Furtado, campaigns director for Greenpeace in Brazil.

"Although the government could celebrate in recent years a decrease in deforestation, the fact is that structurally this didn't change.

"The environment ministry still lacks funding. You still have situations where the police don't have a helicopter to fly over a certain area or there is no fuel in the truck to go to verify if an area is being deforested or not. You still have a problem with availability of maps," Mr Furtado said.

"The tools to decrease deforestation and monitor implementation of the law are still not good enough."

Frontier mentality

That concern is reflected by John Carter, director of Alianca da Terra, a group that promotes environmental awareness in land management.

Mr Carter, however, has a different perspective on the causes and how the problem needs to be addressed.

What is important to do is to share out responsibility for illegal deforestation

Andre Lima,
Brazilian environment ministry

"Most of the environmental groups are concentrating on the law and why the law is not being upheld and they mysteriously forget this is a frontier and no-one ever upheld the law in any frontier in Europe or the United States, anywhere," he says.

He believes giving producers incentives to reduce the impact on the forest will prove more effective than traditional conservation methods.

The results of failure can be seen in the thick smoke of forest fires being used to clear land.

"I would easily say [2007] was one of the worst years I have seen in 11 years living here," said Mr Carter, who was born in the US but moved here with his Brazilian wife.

"I flew with several different people at several different times in September and October and I couldn't see the end of my wings, I couldn't see the ground.

"I tried to land in the Xingu park [in Mato Grosso]... I couldn't... I couldn't see the runway. I was flying 300 ft (91m) above the forest and couldn't even see it."

Responsibility

Andre Lima, a senior official at the environment ministry with responsibility for the Amazon says it will be difficult to keep deforestation in 2008 down to the level achieved in 2007, especially given the growing market pressures.

But he believes the presidential decree will force a wider range of people to address these concerns.

"What is important to do is to share out responsibility for illegal deforestation," he says.

"The responsibility is not only with the farmers involved at the forefront, but it is the chain of production that buys from them as well. The big soya companies, the meat storage plants that have set up there and know there is no authorisation for deforestation in the area.

"They have to assume a share of the responsibility."

The next few months will be a test of that resolve, but there seems to be a growing recognition on all sides that the Amazon faces another testing period.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/7186776.stm>

Published: 2008/01/14 11:49:47 GMT

© BBC MMVIII