



HOW THREATENED IS THE ENVIRONMENT UNDER THE BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION, SO FAR?

A BRIEF CONTEXT ABOUT *ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN BRAZIL*, SIXTEEN MONTHS INTO THE BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION.

*Here we clarify the primary topics emphasized by the current Brazilian government to characterize its environmental policy in response to Bolsonaro's governing document entitled "**Environmental Policy in Brazil**".*

The National Council of the Legal Amazon and Operation Green Brazil 2

The National Council of the Legal Amazon (Conselho Nacional da Amazonia Legal – CNAL) was not created by Jair Bolsonaro. It was first established by President Itamar Franco, in 1993 ([Decree nº 964/1993](#)). After a few years, it was moved to the Ministry of Environment ([Decree nº 1541/1995](#)), where it remained until 2020. Bolsonaro **transferred** the council from the Ministry of Environment to the vice-presidency on January 21st, 2020, in an attempt to respond to mounting international pressure on Brazil's handling of the 2019 Amazon fire crisis and the 2019/2020 runaway deforestation.

Nowadays, the government considers CNAL as its primary action regarding the conservation and development of the Amazon forest region. The Council's [description](#)

is confusing, with vague goals and weak actions proposed to reinforce environmental and development solutions for Amazonia. Five months after its transfer to the Vice-Presidency, which was falsely referred to in the document as its “creation,” the council [has presented no plan, no budget, and no goals](#).

In the meantime, successive attempts to dismantle environmental legislation are underway. The primary proposal attempted to allow mining and agribusiness in indigenous lands ([Bill 191/2020](#)). Also, in a recent interview, Hamilton Mourão (the vice-president and Council’s Coordinator), said there [is no plan to create new protected areas](#).

This reformed council is only composed of [state ministers – people who barely know the region – and coordinated by the vice-president](#), General Hamilton Mourao. State governors, who had a seat in its previous composition, were excluded, and so were federal environmental agencies IBAMA and ICMBio, as well as FUNAI (the federal agency for protection of indigenous peoples). Thus, no one with knowledge of the Amazon region is sitting on the Amazon Council. Worse, the council has a militaristic perspective (although expected, since the vice-president is a general), which was very harmful to the forest during the military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. Needless to say, there is also a lack of civil society members. The absence of such actors is, of course, the best recipe to fail at improving Amazonia’s conservation.

The central government strategy for combatting deforestation and fires in 2020 – and safeguard the social and biological diversity in Amazonia – was to deploy Army troops into the jungle, as part of Green Brazil Operation 2 (*Operação Verde Brasil 2*). The operation was unsuccessful in its first month, and it could even harm the forest, as we shall see.

Operação Verde Brasil 2 began on May 11, and so far, hasn’t managed to stall deforestation. In May, the area of deforestation alerts detected by INPE’s Deter system grew by [12%, the worst May in five years of the new system’s data series](#). Another proxy of the primary concern is the [78% increase in deforestation alerts between August 2019 and April 2020, compared to the same period last year](#). This upward trend suggests that the annual deforestation, measured between August 2019 and July 2020, may even beat the grisly 2019 record.

Although, Army presence has had a positive track record against crime in the Amazon region. In 2005, it helped drive down deforestation, and in 2019 it helped shorten the burning season. The military has always been a support force when under the guidance of specialized agencies like IBAMA, which have the expertise, the tools, and the intelligence to fight environmental crime. After General Mourão took over, IBAMA and ICMBio became subordinate to the Army, which is in [command of the operation and ignoring IBAMA in its strategy](#). Also, the operation consumed the 12,000,000.00 USD per month, which is nearly IBAMA’s entire annual budget for surveillance and control.

The Army has also declared it [will not confiscate nor destroy the equipment and machinery used in illegal actions](#). They also prefer to distribute educational flyers to the offenders, instead of punishing them. Curiously, this fits the [demands of wildcat](#)

[miners that were recently received in the Presidential palace](#). In this unprecedented meeting, illegal miners asked the government to stop destroying their equipment. Recently, an exchange of messages between Bolsonaro and his former Minister of Justice showed a bizarre interference favoring illegal miners acting in indigenous lands. [Bolsonaro questioned why the National Force gave support to IBAMA in an operation against illegal mining in Amazonian indigenous lands](#).

Environmental Conservation in Brazil

Brazil used to be a leader in environmental actions and showed impressive results in improving conservation while increasing production. Such results happened due to the implementation of many public policies focusing on: reducing deforestation rates, improving the development of vulnerable areas, strengthening law enforcement agencies (i.e., IBAMA), and creating protected areas. Fundo Amazônia is one of the most successful projects on this subject, which illustrates this former situation very well.

Bolsonaro's administration is a radical shockwave of these ideas and policies. The environment (as well as human rights and even democracy) is one of his major enemies. The explosion of deforestation and fire outbreaks since he took office is not coincidental.

Brazil has the world's biggest terrestrial biodiversity, with many important biomes, especially (but not only) tropical forests. The extension of our forests is still vast, and that is beside the point. The point is: What is the current Brazilian government doing to sustainably use and protect that biodiversity? Is the Bolsonaro administration leading the country to conserve the forests we have, or is it acting contrarily? There have been many steps backward, in many spheres, that clearly take away previous victories in environmental conservation and social justice. Here is a brief list of some of those actions:

1. Cease of contracts under Fundo Amazônia;
2. Reinforcement of PADDD ideas in Brazil (Downgrading, Downsizing, Degazettement, and Reclassification of Protected Areas);
3. The end of indigenous land demarcation;
4. Weakening of environmental and surveillance agencies, like IBAMA, ICMBio, FUNAI;
5. Pardoning (or freezing) of environmental fines;
6. Blaming NGOs for fires and deforestation;
7. Firing IBAMA's chief inspector for failing to maintain a spectacular operation against wildcat miners and land-grabbers in three indigenous lands;

8. Allowing timber exports before being inspected;
9. Bills that encourage land grabbing, like provisional presidential decree [MP 910](#) and [IN 09 \(FUNAI\)](#).

One must recall that Brazil's Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, proposed to take advantage of the recent health crisis in Brazil. In a recent ministerial meeting, while the media was focused on the pandemic, he proposed to "plow through" and pass all the deregulation measures they could.

In a recent [post from Greenpeace](#), we can find a prime example of how the official discourse can encourage crime against indigenous lands and protected areas. The Ituna Itatá Indigenous Land, in the state of Pará, has 94% of its territory covered with fake land tenure claims by farmers. The farmers register them in a national land registry (CAR), betting on future changes to land tenure legislation that may allow those claims to become legal (which is usually a safe bet). [Ituna Itatá was the most deforested indigenous land in 2019, which is very dangerous for isolated tribes living in this area](#). To stop these sad scores, [IBAMA carried out some operations in 2020, using a strategy known as Theory of Integrative Surveillance. These actions stopped deforestation and land grabbing in Ituna Itatá and illegal mining in its neighbor indigenous lands \(Apyterewa and Trincadeira Bacajá\)](#). Instead of congratulating them, [Bolsonaro fired all the top IBAMA inspectors after the operation](#) (one of them for being unable to prevent his subordinates from doing their job).

Climate Change

[At the end of 2018, Bolsonaro asked the former administration to withdraw Brazil's offer to host COP 25](#). Among other reasons, Bolsonaro would not like to make any environmental commitments. It is worth recalling that Bolsonaro was planning to leave the Paris Agreement altogether during his Presidential campaign. He did not stick to the plan, but that was due to intense pressure from agribusiness, which feared the consequences trade would face for leaving the deal. Bolsonaro hindered and delayed climate deals from the beginning of his administration. His minister Ricardo Salles tried to cancel Latin America Climate Week in Salvador in 2019 but failed because of a reaction from political allies.

It is vital to stress [that Bolsonaro's administration is packed with flat-out climate deniers](#) such as Foreign minister Ernesto Araújo, Bolsonaro's sons Eduardo and Carlos, and his ideologue, the former astrologer Olavo de Carvalho. References to climate change have all but disappeared in Brazil's diplomatic communications, and not a single dispatch on the issue has been exchanged between Brasília and the Washington Embassy in 2019. Quite the contrary, [Araújo has made the unprecedented move of sending a high-ranking diplomat to a conference of the climate-change-denying Heartland Institute](#). In his recent visit to the US, on September 12th, Araújo [questioned NASA fire-monitoring satellite data and once again cast doubt on global warming](#), saying that various countries are using climate change alarmism to achieve political goals.

All of the climate change governance at the federal level in the Brazilian government has been dismantled over the last sixteen months. In the first week of the new administration, [the climate change and sustainable development departments were scrapped from the Foreign Office structure](#). The National Climate Change and Forest secretariat was likewise extinguished from the Environment Ministry ([Salles told the press it was a promotion](#) rather than extinction since he would appoint a special advisor to the minister on climate, which he never did).

The Inter-ministerial Climate Change Committee (CIM) and its Executive Group (GEx), the highest instances of federal climate change governance, were also extinguished, and so was the National Redd+ Committee. The end of the National Climate Change Secretariat has frozen all the policies that were planned and implemented by the office, chiefly the plans for deforestation prevention and control in the Amazon (PPCDAm) and the Cerrado (PPCerrado). These two plans are the centerpieces of Brazil's NDC since deforestation makes up 45% of Brazil's greenhouse-gas emissions.

The decade-old national Climate Fund (Fundo Clima), which funded mitigation and adaptation projects, [is also in limbo](#). There were no plans for using the [resources presented in 2019](#). Its steering committee was extinguished in April and reformed (on paper) in November, only a fraction of the money available for the ministry was spent on adaptation and mitigation actions. The government was sued for freezing the fund by every political party on the grounds of illegal omission.

Using the historical rate of the last 20 years, the government includes in the account years when there were peaks of fire outbreaks, such as 2004, 2007, and 2010. Between 2005 and 2012, with the implementation of effective policies to combat deforestation, there was a significant reduction of 80% in the Amazon deforestation rate. Even though this downward trend has slowed down and deforestation has grown again in recent years, what we see this year is an explosion in deforestation and burning driven by anti-environmental policies.

Brazil is indeed the sixth-biggest emitter of greenhouse gases. The major part of Brazilian emissions is due to deforestation (SEEG Brazil). Since deforestation rates are increasing these last months, [Brazil will probably be the only major economy with increasing emissions during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). It's worth saying that the emission showed little gain for the country and Brazilian people, since illegal deforestation does not generate wealth, [and 99% of the deforestation this year was illegal](#).

Land Tenure Regulation in Brazil

As said above, there is a massive effort from the Bolsonaro administration to weaken environmental laws, encouraging land grabbing. Recently, the provisional presidential decree MP 910 - which is analyzed by the Legislature but has the force of law since its edition – attempted to make a gigantic leap in this direction. It is so nonsensical that [federal attorneys](#) recorded a [video](#) and wrote a [technical report](#) against it. According to them, MP 910 would make a mess out of land tenure legislation, and increase

violence in rural areas. Enormous national and international pressure postponed this idea, and it lost its validity. It has since been replaced with Bill (PL) 6233, an ill-disguised attempt at making the MP less unpalatable and easier to pass the Brazilian House of Representatives. The rural caucus has been pushing to vote on it in the middle of the pandemic, to seize on a fast-track process put in place to speed up the approval of COVID-related legislation.

Land grabbing is occurring in many parts of the Brazilian Amazon, and some reports make it clear. There are more than [1800 requests for land regularization in Pará that overlap with protected areas](#) according to a study performed by Publica. Another study, by IDESAM, [showed a similar pattern along highway BR 319, in Amazonas state](#). Land grabbing is getting [very common in all of Amazonia, and 35% of all deforestation in 2019 occurred in public lands](#). Besides, the IN 09 will allow land grabbing even inside indigenous land. Governments have never implemented land tenure legislation, and because of that, we have historical problems regarding the land property in Brazil. However, proposing new laws that just benefit land-grabbing (which was indeed challenged by attorneys) is absolutely the wrong way.

Recent discussions in Congress about the revising the Forest Code – [especially concerning reducing \(or even ending\) legal reserves](#) – also turn on the red lights about the future patterns of land grabbing. Nowadays, the legal reserves make up 80% of the property in Amazonia, and reducing it will generate substantial deforestation rates. The author of this bill is the president's eldest son, Flavio Bolsonaro.

Democratic space under threat

Bolsonaro was elected under a populist agenda. He [is a threat to our democracy and](#) considers human rights activists, indigenous people, and environmental NGOs as his enemies. His desire – and one of his major projects, as he said in one of the last ministerial meetings to deal with the COVID-19 crisis – is to arm the civil population. Also, even in these last difficult months, compiling thousands of deaths, he [typically tries to fight with other republican actors, like the congress and supreme court](#). There is a clear risk of losing democratic space in his administration, and this threatens the entire country, especially its social diversity and biodiversity.