

Amazon deforestation surges to 12-year high under Bolsonaro

An area seven times larger than Greater London has been lost in what one activist called a 'humiliating and shameful' destruction



More than 11,000 sq km of rainforest was destroyed in Brazil between August 2019 and July 2020, official figures show.

Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro
Tue 1 Dec 2020

A vast expanse of Amazon rainforest seven times larger than Greater London was destroyed over the last year as deforestation surged to a 12-year high under Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro.

Figures released by the Brazilian space institute, Inpe, on Monday showed at least 11,088 sq km of rainforest was razed between August 2019 and July this year – the highest figure since 2008.

Carlos Rittl, a Brazilian environmentalist who works at Germany's Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, said the numbers were "humiliating, shameful and outrageous" – and a clear sign of the damage being done to the environment since Bolsonaro took office in January 2019.

"This is an area a third the size of Belgium – gigantic areas of forest that are being lost simply because under Bolsonaro those who are doing the destroying feel no fear of being punished," Rittl said.

“Bolsonaro’s great achievement when it comes to the environment has been this tragic destruction of forests which has turned Brazil into perhaps one of the greatest enemies of the global environment and into an international pariah too.”

Brazil’s vice-president, Hamilton Mourão, tried to put a positive spin on the bleak figures as he visited Inpe’s headquarters in the city of São José dos Campos on Monday. Mourão claimed the annual increase of 9.5% was less than half the anticipated figure of about 20%.

“We’re not here to commemorate any of this, because it’s nothing to commemorate. But it means that the efforts being launched [against Amazon deforestation] are starting to yield fruit,” Mourão claimed.

Environmentalists, who blame Bolsonaro’s deliberate weakening of enforcement efforts for the rise, scoffed at that reading. “This number is an outrage – it doesn’t tell us anything positive about the Bolsonaro administration at all. On the contrary, it shows that despite the [Covid-19] quarantine, environmental crime has increased,” Rittl said.

Mourão’s comment about the smaller-than-expected rise was “like saying that we were expecting 300,000 Covid deaths and we ‘only’ had 200,000,” Rittl added.

Cristiane Mazzetti, a Greenpeace spokesperson for the Amazon, said: “This is an even worse number than 2019 and a direct reflection of the Bolsonaro administration’s anti-environmental policies which have weakened the monitoring agencies and used misguided strategies to fight deforestation, such as deploying the armed forces rather than environmental protection agents.”

“These numbers show us that we are continuing to move in the wrong direction than the one needed to deal with the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis.”

The Observatório do Clima group said soaring destruction came as no surprise to those “following the dismantling of environmental policy that has been underway in Brazil since January 2019”.

“The numbers simply show that Jair Bolsonaro’s plan has worked. They are the result of a successful project to annihilate the ability of the Brazilian state and its monitoring agencies to care for our forests and fight crime in the Amazon,” it said in a statement.

Mourão said the figures, which were produced with information from the Prodes satellite system, showed most of the devastation was occurring in four regions: Pará state, the north of Mato Grosso state, the south of Amazonas state and Rondônia.

Pará, a longtime deforestation hotspot, was by far the worst-affected state accounting for almost 47% of the total deforestation.

“Thanks to Inpe’s work we now have a perfect sense of where we need to focus our actions in order to prevent illegal activities occurring,” Mourão told reporters, praising its “brilliant scientists” for their efforts.

But despite a growing “green” government propaganda campaign – which recently saw Mourão take foreign ambassadors on a tour of the Amazon region – environmentalists

and foreign investors are skeptical about its efforts to protect the world's biggest rainforest.

During that three-day excursion ambassadors were not taken to any of the deforestation hotspots which Mourão detailed on Monday – and activists dismissed the visit as a “sham”.

In May thousands of Brazilian troops were sent to the Amazon supposedly to fight environmental crime, although some believe they are merely making things worse.

Rittl said one ray of light was the recent defeat of Bolsonaro's key international ally, Donald Trump. “Without the backing of Trump in the US, the international pressure [on Bolsonaro over the environment] will increase and it will increase a lot,” he predicted.

Bolsonaro is one of only a tiny group of world leaders who has yet to recognise Joe Biden's victory and on Sunday claimed, without proof, that unnamed “sources” had convinced him the US election had been plagued with fraud.