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## Developing the Final Frontier: Brazil and the Amazon Jungle in the 20th Century

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Developing the Final Frontier:  
Brazil and the Amazon Jungle in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The Amazon jungle has always played a key role in the development of Brazil. The Amazon Basin dominates Brazil not only geographically, covering 60 percent of the nation's land base, but culturally and economically as well. Renowned the world over for its stunning beauty and lush forest, the Amazon is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. Home to an estimated 55,000 plant species, 428 mammal species and 1,600 bird species, the Amazon is seen by many as a source of life and a last stronghold of nature in an increasingly man-made world.<sup>1</sup> Others view the Amazon Basin as the answer to Brazil's economic prosperity into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, looking to its vast expanses as a source of timber, gold, and agricultural exports. Indigenous groups, the Brazilian Government, natural resource industries, and environmental interest groups are among the many stakeholders who have contributed to the complexity of the debate over how to manage, develop and protect the Amazon.

For much of Brazil's history, the Amazon itself has proved an effective barrier to human settlement. The region's geography is not conducive to settlement. The soil is poor, the nutrients being stored in the dense plant life rather than top soil; the rains are heavy, eroding and leaching exposed soil; and once cleared for agriculture, will only grow crops for a few seasons before becoming fallow.<sup>2</sup> Add to this the prevalence of tropical diseases and the extreme heat and humidity and it is easy to see

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, "The Taming of the Amazon." *Foreign Policy* 136(2003):84.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Wagley, *Man in the Amazon* (Gainesville, FL: The University Presses of Florida, 1974), 11.

why the Amazon continues to this day to be one of the sparsest populated locations on earth.

While they may not be the most hospitable places to live, particularly as an agriculturalist, few would argue the value of tropical rainforests. Covering only 7 percent of the earth's surface, these rainforests contain over 50 percent of its biodiversity.<sup>3</sup> The rainforests are the lungs of the world, cycling through carbon dioxide to replenish the atmosphere with oxygen. They are also a source of popular foods and pharmaceuticals. These resources have been influential in shaping Brazil's expansion into the Amazon. Currently, an estimated 16 million people make the Amazon home, 61 percent of them living in urban settings.<sup>4</sup> These people live remote lives dependant largely on local production and work both in small-scale agricultural ventures and large-scale industrial enterprises.

While many question the strong desire of Brazilians to establish settlements within their western jungle regions, there are certainly some valid reasons that were fueling their desire to do so. The thousands of acres of unpopulated land could relieve population pressure along the coastline, particularly in the north. Additionally, the jungle contains natural resources such as minerals, gold, rubber, and timber which were looked at to fuel economic development in Brazil. Perhaps the main reason, however, is a nationalistic, deep-seated belief that the Amazon must be populated in order to guarantee Brazilian sovereignty over the land.<sup>5</sup> With so much

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<sup>3</sup> John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto, *Breakfast of Biodiversity* (Oakland, CA: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1995), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Cattaneo, *Balancing Agricultural Development and Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon*, (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2002), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Wagley, *Man in the Amazon*, 7.

of the western border located within the remote jungle, thousands of miles from any population centers on the Brazilian side, it is easy to see why.

The first waves of people to settle the Amazon basin were primarily relegated to the floodplains of the Amazon and associated tributaries. These early arrivals were rubber tappers who tapped rubber trees during the rubber boom which lasted from the 1870s through to WWI when synthetic rubbers began to be developed, drastically lowering the need for rubber tappers.<sup>6</sup> Following the decline of the rubber boom, workers transferred their efforts over to enterprises, focusing on other extractive resources such as Brazil nuts, animal skins and mining. While the mining industry has had its ups and downs over the past century, it still continues to be one of the primary economic sectors in Brazil today.

When Brazil began construction on Brasilia, the city that was to replace Rio de Janeiro as the nation's capital, in 1956, the government was attempting to further encourage settlement of its interior.<sup>7</sup> It was believed that by placing the capital inland, it would encourage the settlement of the surrounding region and further integrate the territories of Brazil. While Brasilia never did fully achieve its designers, Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, dream to become a modernist utopia, nor was it initially popular with the citizens of Brazil, Brasilia did succeed in further reaching people into the Amazon Jungle.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brian J. Godfrey, "Migration to the Gold-mining Frontier in Brazilian Amazonia," *Geographical Review* 82(1992), 461.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Cornish, "Building Utopia: Lessons from Brasilia," *Futurist* 25(1991): 29.

<sup>8</sup> "Dreaming up Brasilia," *Economist* 353(1999): 57.

The 1970s marked a rapid increase in the rate of expansion into the Amazon basin. When Gen. Emílio Médici announced the start of what would be a multi-million dollar project to build a trans-Amazonian highway, he boasted that it would tame the forest and bring civilization to Brazil's most underdeveloped region.<sup>9</sup> This was a period of high optimism regarding the future of the Amazon Basin in Brazil. As Economist João S. Campari noted on the central ideas behind the movement: "From the misery of the drought-wrecked Northeast, people without land would be linked via the Trans-Amazonian Highway and other infrastructure programs to the lands without people in the Amazon."<sup>10</sup> Credit and tax incentive schemes were launched by the federal government to attract the investment of private capital, through a system similar to the homestead acts of the United States in the preceding century, and the funding of the Trans-Amazonian Highway. The highway, which was to consist of an estimated 5,000 kilometers of unpaved road was to connect the states of Maranhão in the east through Pará and Amazonas to the state of Acre on the western border with Bolivia.<sup>11</sup>

Government sponsored expansion into the Amazon during this era of expansion can generally be divided into two categories: the active state role in the process of frontier colonialism focused towards small scale agriculture, and the support of corporate activities such as cattle ranching and mining. On both sides though, these policies encouraged deforestation of the Amazon through their

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *Taming of the Amazon*, 84.

<sup>10</sup> João S. Campari, *The Economics of Deforestation in the Amazon: Dispelling the Myths*, (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005), 34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

development by providing incentives for deforestation in rules which determine the security of a land claim based upon land clearing, enacting progressive land taxes that encourage the conversion of forest to crop land or pasture, and maintaining a tax scheme aimed towards corporate livestock ranches that subsidized inefficient ranches established on cleared forest land.<sup>12</sup> Faces with international criticism and internal fiscal difficulties, these financial incentives were eliminated in the 1980s.

During this time, an interesting relationship developed between small farmers and larger, mainly industrial cattle operations. Due largely to the unsuitability of jungle soil for agriculture as well as the informal nature of land laws, there was a high rate of turnover amongst homesteaders in the Amazon—frequently only a few years after clearing the plot of land. These lands in turn were bought up by commercial agriculture industries to be used as cattle fields or sugar plantations.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, this creates a system in which the small farmers are working as an agent for the larger operations, arriving first with the task of clearing and preparing the land for commercial agriculture rather than as their own independent farming operations.

The take over of the commercial industrial companies in the 1980s was followed by an urbanization trend within Brazil's interior. The urbanization of the inland frontiers is due largely to migrant workers who worked intermittently in agriculture, cattle ranching, timber extraction, mining and other extractive industries.<sup>14</sup> The 1980s also saw the rise of a new gold rush. The discovery of gold in the Madera River in the northern state of Rondônia in 1987 sparked a rush of people

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<sup>12</sup> Cattaneo, *Development and Deforestation*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Campari, *Economics of Deforestation*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Godfrey, *Gold-mining Frontier*, 458.

into the traditional land holdings of the Yanomami people.<sup>15</sup> International outcry over the impact on the environment as well as outbreaks of disease which wiped out as much as ten percent on the Yanomamai population caused the closure of the region to mining in 1990. The areas remote nature and low priority level, however, have made enforcing the closure difficult and mining still continues in the region.

As Brazil entered into the 1990s, its small farmers were again faced with the challenges of what to do with their plots of land. A frontier farmer in the Amazon faces three choices: he can keep his land and continue to farm it, he can keep his land but allow it to go fallow and hold it for future store of value, or he can sell it at the going market price.<sup>16</sup> Under this model, a farmer is likely to keep his land only if the expected income from agriculture is greater than the price of the land. As a result of this, there continues to be a high turnover rate among small farmers and large scale agriculture is expanding within the Amazon. This time, however, it is most often due to the high price of land rather than the depletion of soil nutrients and deforestation.<sup>17</sup>

It is impossible and even illogical to completely remove humans from the Amazon basin altogether. These development projects, however, as many environmental interest groups have pointed out over the past 40 years, are taking their toll on the fragile rainforest ecosystems. On average about 20,000 square kilometers of land in the Amazon Basin is deforested every year.<sup>18</sup> Many concerned citizens throughout the globe are concerned with the ways in which Brazil's government has

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 461.

<sup>16</sup> Campari, *Economics of Deforestation*, 182.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>18</sup> David Goodman and Anthony Hall, *The Future of Amazonia: Destruction or Sustainable Development?* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 1.

managed the Amazon, whose environmental protection often seems little more than an afterthought. They fear that Brazil's policies leave the area vulnerable to threats from poachers, illegal miners and drug traffickers.<sup>19</sup> The government has also faced critique for the environmental impact of their policies favoring economic development (Such as soy farm subsidies and ecotourism).

It is clear that in some way, a compromise must be reached concerning land use in the Amazon Basin. The Amazon is one of the world's most treasured ecological resources and steps should be taken to protect it. However, it also serves as a source of life and income (albeit meager for most), and those people should not simply be shut off the land. The past 30 years have been marked by extensive research from the international community focused upon Brazil, and our understanding of its many complex ecosystems and the interconnected nature of its worlds has increased greatly as a result.

It is hopeful then that with the aid of this new research, people will be able to develop a more sustainable model of living in the Amazon. A model perhaps in which people travel into this final frontier of human settlement on earth, not as consumers, but as an active part of an ecosystem—both giving and taking from the land. The Amazon Jungle is indeed full of resources and the Brazilians have perhaps not been incorrect to look towards it as the determining factor in their future. It is my hope, however, that the people of Brazil take the steps to ensure the protection of their valuable resources into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Taming the Amazon*, 84.



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