

Who's Burning the Amazon? Rampant Capitalism

Market forces and the administration of Jair Bolsonaro are supercharging the deforestation that's imperiling the world's biggest tropical rainforest.

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At the moment, capitalists value the Amazon for its agricultural potential, but that value is fleeting. When an agribusiness clears a forest, it fells the vegetation, lets it dry out, and then burns it. Victor Moriyama/Getty Images

Capitalism rarely meets something it can't put a price on. Goods and services, like cars and housecleaning, those have a price. Health insurance puts a price on your well-being—and worse, slavery puts a price on a human being. Exotic plants and animals have their own prices on the black market ([or on Facebook](#)).

The Amazon rainforest, though, defies commodification. The multitudinous species, interacting in ways that elude human understanding, the vast rainforest's role in sucking up CO₂—let's just say the Amazon never sends us a bill. And what can't be adequately priced gets destroyed: The Brazilian

government of Jair Bolsonaro [is essentially encouraging farmers](#) to burn the Amazon to make way for agriculture, the only price of importance being that of cattle (Brazil is the world's [biggest beef exporter](#), providing 20 percent of global exports) and crops like soybeans.

To be clear, fires in the Amazon are nothing new—so long as humans have been deforesting, [they've been modifying the rainforest to burn](#). But after years of progress to slow its destruction, deforestation is now accelerating, fueling more fires. It's a stunningly clear example of how human behavior can shift with a

change in political whims, in this case the arrival of Bolsonaro. What's different this year is that a lot of the fires have been set by people who were emboldened by Bolsonaro's rhetoric, says University of Florida ecologist Emilio Bruna, who studies the Amazon. "They're illegally setting fires as a means of clearing land, and using it to intimidate indigenous activists or environmental activists."

And it's the indigenous peoples who stand to lose the most in the Amazon. They've coexisted for millennia with the rainforest without burning it to the ground, providing for themselves and their local trading partners. "Capitalism valorizes progress from destruction," says Sonia Guajajara, executive coordinator of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, speaking through a translator. "That's not what we believe—we can take from nature without destroying everything."

At the moment, capitalists value the Amazon for its agricultural potential, but that value is fleeting. When an agribusiness clears a forest, it fells the vegetation, lets it dry out, then [burns it](#). Problem is, the vast majority of the nutrients in the Amazon are sequestered in those plants, not the soil, so the dirt quickly ends up lacking nutrients. "You go from a really lush tropical forest to a completely unproductive cattle pasture almost immediately," says Bruna.

It's simple economics on the surface—clear a forest, make money, exhaust the soil, move on, repeat—but in the Amazon, nothing is simple. The rainforest is responsible for 20 percent of rainfall in the region, the vegetation itself [providing the moisture](#). Cut down the trees and you cut down on rain, which means less water to support agriculture and more parched vegetation, which means more fires. "You have a fire, you lose trees, you lose precipitation, you put particulate matter in the air, which is also going to alter the hydrological cycles and the regional climate cycles," says Bruna.

For the good of Brazil and the planet as a whole, the deforestation of the Amazon must stop, because the region may be approaching a tipping point in which it transforms into [a woody grassland](#). And we're only at the beginning of this year's fire season in Brazil—26,000 blazes have raged just this month, the highest in 10 years.

Farmers in Brazil are [starting these fires](#) not because of some vendetta against the rainforest, but because they need to feed their families. Monitoring forests and slapping deforesters with fines simply isn't enough to fix this problem, even *if* the Bolsonaro administration had any interest in doing so. As long as there's money to be made in destroying the Amazon, and so long as a complicit government is in power in Brazil, the Amazon will burn.

So what do you do with a problem like Brazil? The unfortunate truth is, not much. "Ultimately, this is not a problem we can or should be solving," says Bruna. "This savior complex has got to go—it's not our country. Brazil has the capacity, it has the intellectual firepower to do it, it has the financial means to do it. If it's lacking the willpower at the political level, that's a different thing."

The people of Brazil knew what they were getting when they elected Bolsonaro, after all. "He very clearly campaigned on things like weakening environmental protections and regulations, opening indigenous reserves to mining," says Bruna. "This isn't surprising anybody."

So alright, it's Brazil's chunk of the Amazon, and it can do with it what it pleases. While you may not have much power to effect change, that doesn't mean you're powerless. You can support organizations doing work on the ground and, well, vote. We have our own environmental crisis in the US under Trump, who pulled out of the Paris Agreement and has weakened environmental regulations across the board. At this very moment he's trying to vaporize logging restrictions in a [16.7 million-acre national forest in Alaska](#).

"Vote for people whose environmental values align with our own," says Bruna. "It's difficult to have the moral high ground as a country if we're not ourselves doing what we can to protect our own environment. Those leaders are the ones who can bring pressure to bear."

Scientists and a variety of nonprofits have also been designing programs to fight deforestation the world over. [In Brazil](#) and elsewhere in Central and South America, as well as Africa, researchers have been experimenting with an idea called payments for ecosystem services. Instead of fining farmers who deforest, governments and NGOs pay them to not deforest the land. "Rather than that stick of penalizing

people and fining them, you can turn it into a carrot and say, OK we're going to compensate you," says Northwestern University economist Seema Jayachandran.

And the science says [it works](#). Collaborating with an NGO in Uganda, Jayachandran approached landowners and offered 70,000 Ugandan shillings, or \$28 US, per hectare per year if they kept the forest intact, in effect placing a value on that ecosystem. A third accepted, consenting to spot checks and surveys. After two years, Jayachandran and her colleagues found that in villages that adopted the program, tree cover declined by 4.2 percent, compared to 9.1 percent in control villages.

The tricky bit is enforcement. You need satellite imagery to confirm tree cover, as well as those spot checks on the ground to make sure the landowners aren't thinning the forest, a subtlety satellites might miss. And you'd need the support of the government, which is problematic considering the Bolsonaro administration has more or less granted agribusiness the Brazilian version of Manifest Destiny to steamroll the Amazon. And of course, this system only works with farmers who own the land, not those invading virgin or indigenous lands.

But the beauty of such a program is that it weaponizes money, the only language capitalism speaks. And it

can work in concert with other efforts. The Nature Conservancy, for instance, has trained cattle ranchers in Brazil to [switch to farming cacao](#). This crop happily grows in the relative darkness of a rainforest, so farmers [don't have to deforest](#) in order to cultivate it. In fact, planting cacao can actually boost local biodiversity. And theoretically, farmers could earn a living growing cacao *and* get paid not to deforest their land.

The devastating truth, though, is that it'll take either a change of power in Brazil or the whims of capitalism to make real progress on reversing deforestation in the Amazon. Raising cattle is profitable, and it's cattle ranching that's driving most of this deforestation. "It's driven by financial incentives," says Bruna. "If the bottom fell out of the cattle market, you would find that deforestation would probably drop dramatically."

Meanwhile, indigenous peoples in Brazil continue to lose land to emboldened deforesters—politics and capitalism combining to form an existential horror show. "Indigenous people are against capitalism because the profit is for a few people and the destruction and death are for many people," says Guajajara, of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil. "If we keep up in this rhythm in this agribusiness model, the deforestation of the planet will come soon."

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