



Logging in the Amazon

Illegal and predatory logging plays a central role in the destruction of the Amazon. It is now generally accepted that illegal logging is now the norm, rather than the exception, in the Brazilian Amazon. The government's own investigations estimate that 80 percent of the logs cut are illegal.

With the depletion of forests in Southeast Asia and central Africa, the Amazon is being targeted by domestic and transnational corporations as a key source for tropical timber products. Huge majestic trees like the Samauma, also known as the "Queen of the Forest", are being exploited to make cheap plywood for construction industries in the US, Japan and Europe.

Working in remote forest areas, the loggers often use false permits, ignore limitations of legal permits, cut species protected by law and steal from protected areas and indigenous lands. These are often small or medium scale operations that are able to avoid detection because of the remoteness of the logging locations, the weak presence of the federal environmental agency IBAMA, and a complex chain-of-custody in the cutting, hauling and transporting of the logs.

Legally approved forest operations in the Brazilian Amazon commonly provide cover for illegal logging. Logs are frequently cut illegally upriver from approved operations and clandestinely floated downstream. Once past an approved operation, they are "legalised" with forged documents claiming that the logs were cut on the property of the forestry operation.

Since Greenpeace set up an office in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon two years ago, we have seen a steady stream of these illegal rafts heading downstream. Greenpeace has worked with local communities and IBAMA, tracking illegal activity, mapping logging areas, investigating companies and taking direct action against companies within Brazil and in the international marketplace. Using a small Cessna airplane for surveillance, Greenpeace has been able to locate massive illegal log rafts and report these to the government authorities. We have developed a technique to track illegal logs back to the exporting companies using ultraviolet paint. And we have researched the origin and destinations of tens of thousands of cubic metres of timber. Greenpeace recently completed a map with all the "legal" forest operations, a powerful tool to be used by local authorities for monitoring. All of this research points to an illegal logging industry out of control.

These are just the examples of the illegal activity that are known. The volume of illegal logs discovered would be much higher if IBAMA's inspection structure were stronger. In Amazonas state, the largest IBAMA team in the Amazon basin currently relies on only one inspector per four million hectares, an area the size of Switzerland. Today, IBAMA estimates it can only identify 10 percent of all logging activities in the Brazilian Amazon.

Greenpeace also discovered that one transnational logging giant, WTK, purchased 313,000 hectares of land from a private landowner, 150,000 hectares of this illegally overlapped with indigenous territory. The Deni who live in this region begin the physical demarcation of their territory in September to guarantee that WTK and others will be prohibited from logging on their land. But the WTK lands are located close to many indigenous lands along the Cuniuá and Xerua rivers and an Extractive Reserve (RESEX) where rubber and other non-timber products are collected. Scientists have almost no information about the environmental importance of this remote forest region.

Vast areas of the Amazon rainforest are still intact. However, there are now 7,595 companies registered in the Brazilian Amazon and deforestation rates are growing at an alarming rate. This region that supplied 12 percent of the Brazilian log production in 1970, now produces some 30 million cubic meters of logs a year, or 90 percent of Brazil's total tropical timber production. According to official data, Amazon deforestation grew from one to 15 percent in that same period and these trends are expected to continue. Predatory 'selective' logging affects areas almost the same size as those clearcut annually, but its impact is not included in official deforestation figures.

Selective extraction of valuable trees can directly change the forest structure and its species composition, as in most cases, other trees are destroyed in the process. According to scientists, Amazon logging companies extract or damage 10 to 40 percent of the live biomass of a forest area, and open up the canopy by 14 to 50 percent. The reduced canopy cover can also make the forests more vulnerable to forest fires. The indirect consequences of offsetting the cost of road building and forest clearance opens up the forest to further destructive activities including large-scale hunting, fuel wood gathering and clearing for agriculture.

Despite the high rate of illegal logging, important timber importing nations such as the US, UK, Spain, France and Japan have taken few, if any, steps to ensure that products they import come from legal, let alone ecologically well-managed sources. In practice, the only way to ensure that wood and wood products in the Amazon come from legal and well-managed sources is to demand that all such products have been independently certified to at least the standards adopted by the Forest Stewardship Council.



Logging in the Amazon: facts and figures

- An area of 589,000 km², larger than France, has disappeared in the last 30 years. Satellite data has shown that deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon last year (19,532 km²) was greater than at any time since 1995.
- According to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, which monitors deforestation via satellite, the total annual deforested area equalled 19,836 square kilometres between August 1999 and August 2000. This is equivalent to four million soccer fields. This represents a 15 percent increase in deforestation compared to 17,259 from August 1998 to August 1999.
- The logging industry in the Amazon is highly wasteful. Seventy percent of all logged timber ends up as unusable fragments or sawdust.
- According to the Brazilian government, approximately 100 million hectares of land, or 20 percent of the entire Amazon region, is held illegally.
- The Samauma tree is known in the Amazon as the "Queen of the Forest" because of its great height which can reach well over 50 metres. Some Indian groups consider the tree sacred. The softwood timber of the Samauma is pink-white and is used by locals to make rafts, while the roots are often used to make huts by forest dwellers. The Samauma tree is now being cut to make cheap plywood for export.
- The Brazilian (Big Leaf) mahogany tree is one of the most well known hardwood species around the world. But it is also a symbol of the environmental and human degradation inflicted upon the Amazon rainforest and its indigenous populations by the logging industry. Since the 18th century, the tropical forests of South America have been plundered for Mahogany for ship building and later for furniture making. Today, furniture manufacture is the principle end use of Brazilian Mahogany, mainly in the US and the UK. These two countries export finished Mahogany all around the world.
- In Brazil's Amazonas State, all plywood and veneer exporting companies were either directly or indirectly involved in illegal logging between 1997 and 1999, including WTK that regularly exports plywood to the UK. In Pará state, the largest exporters are known to have purchased from illegal sources, including the Japanese logging company Eidai do Brasil which exports wood products to Japan, the Netherlands, US and UK.
- Between January 2000 and April 2001, exports from the Brazilian port of Santarem to the Netherlands alone totalled 22,681 cubic metres of wood and wood products.
- Within a period of only two and a half months this year, 22,392 cubic metres of wood and wood products were shipped from the Brazilian port of Belem to the US.
- Pará state is the biggest log producer in the Amazon, producing approximately 12 million cubic meters in 1997, of which 19 percent was exported. The remaining was consumed by the Brazilian market. Sao Paulo state consumer 12 percent alone, followed by Minas Gerais (8 percent) and Rio Grande do Sul (6 percent).
- Brazil exported 30,968 tonnes (31,600 tons) of mahogany in 2000. The US alone imported 22,442 tonnes (22,900 tons) or 72.4 percent of the total at US\$28.2 million.