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Mongabay Series: [Amazon Conservation](#)

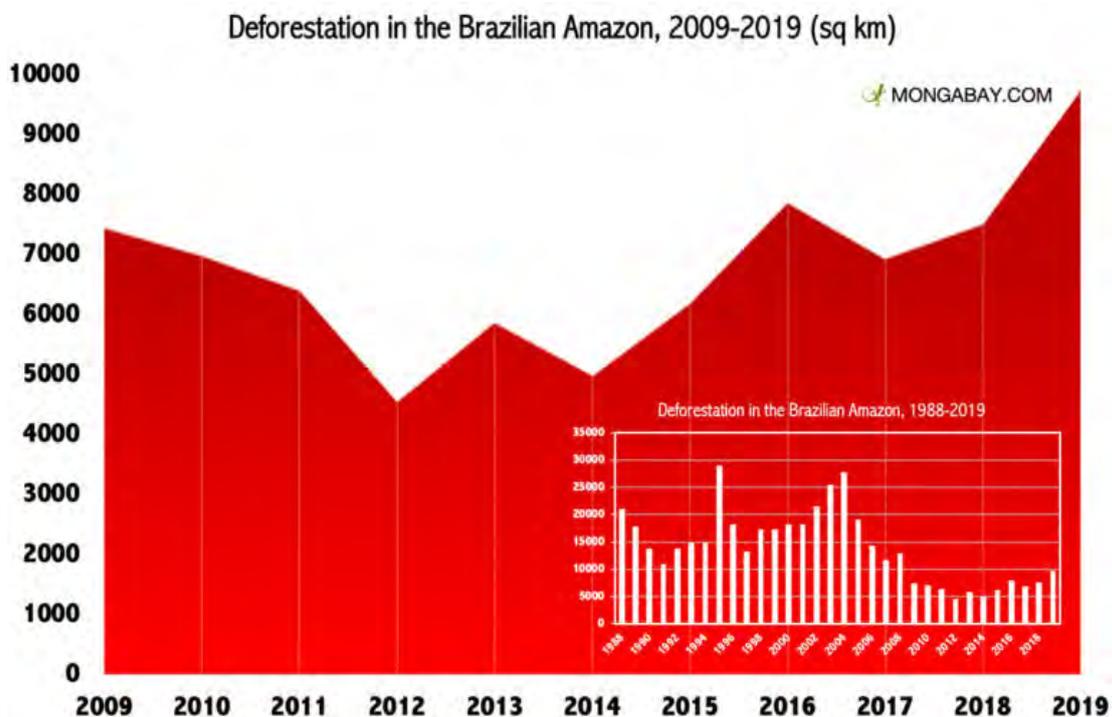
Brazil's new deforestation numbers confirm the “Bolsonaro Effect” despite denials (commentary)

Commentary by **Philip M. Fearnside** on 20 November 2019



- *Just released preliminary figures for “2019” Brazilian Amazon deforestation (covering the August 2018-July 2019 period) show a 29.5 percent increase over the previous year, with 9,762 square kilometers (3,769 square miles) cleared, more than double the rate when Brazil’s famous deforestation decline ended in 2012.*

- *Despite this deforestation surge, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro government claims the increase is not unusual and equivalent to high deforestation rates seen several times since 2012. However, critics point to the administration's rhetoric and environmental deregulation as part of the "Bolsonaro Effect," leading to rampant deforestation.*
- *The government's assertion of innocence fails to note that the new data only covers through July. In August 2019 the deforestation rate was 222 percent above the 2018 value; in September it ran 96 percent higher. The full "Bolsonaro effect" on deforestation won't be on view until the complete "2020" numbers are released next November.*
- *To date, the administration has done nothing to change its inflammatory rhetoric or its anti-environmental policies, so there is every reason to expect that Brazilian deforestation levels will continue to soar. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*



INPE data showing deforestation within an August 1-July 31 timeframe. 2019 thus reflects the 12 months ending July 31 and doesn't include deforestation from August through October. Image by Mongabay using INPE data.

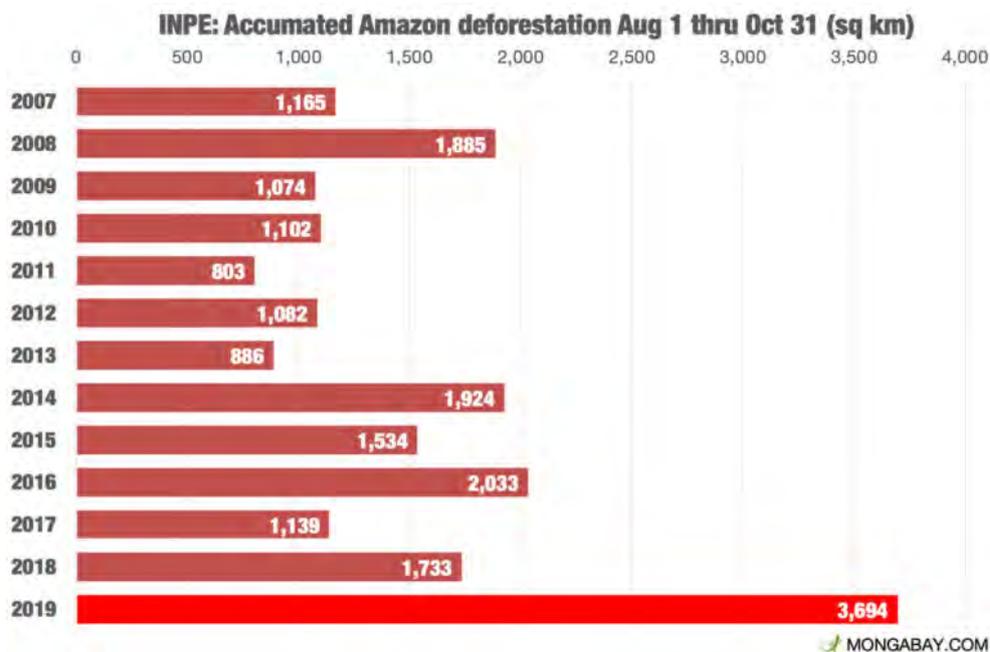
On November 18th the Brazilian government released a preliminary figure for "2019" Amazon deforestation — the August 2018-July 2019 period — showing a 29.5 percent increase over the previous year. A total of 9,762 square kilometers (3,769 square miles) was cleared in this period, more than double the rate when Brazil's famous deforestation decline ended in 2012.

The announcement was made jointly by the Brazilian ministers of science and technology and of environment, with the latter claiming that the numbers indicate that the Jair Bolsonaro presidential administration that came into office in January 2019 has not resulted in an increase in clearing

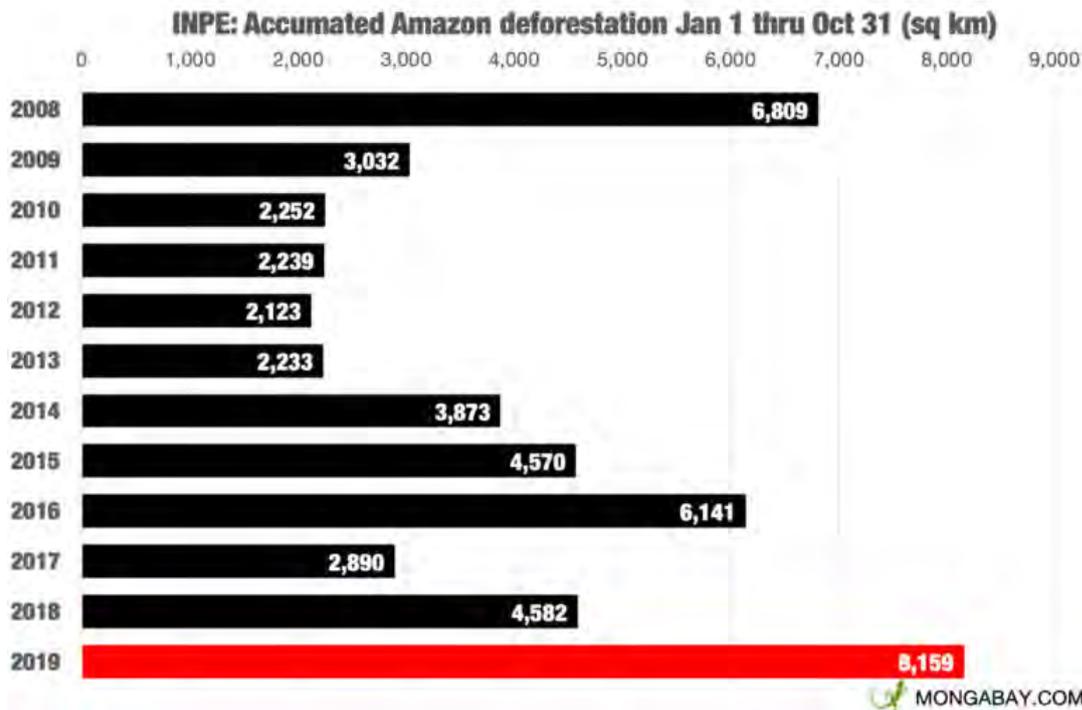
rates. His argument was that this year's increase is just part of the upward trend that has held since the low point in 2012.

Unfortunately, the 2019 deforestation surge can definitely be blamed on the Bolsonaro administration, despite the changes in deforestation rate since 2012 having approached the percentage increase seen this year twice (in 2013 and 2016).

Although this year's percentage increase is only slightly higher than those in the two years with similar percentages, it should be remembered that the PRODES data released on November 18, 2019 only cover the year through July 31st. However, the deforestation rate in the succeeding months has exploded to levels far above those for the same months in the previous year: in August 2019 the deforestation rate was [222 percent](#) above the 2018 value, and the September value was [96 percent](#) higher. As a result, this part of the "Bolsonaro effect" will only be reflected in the data from the PRODES program of the National Institute of Space Research (INPE) when the "2020" numbers are released a year from now.



Deforestation for the August 1-October 31 period in 2019 is pacing well ahead of the historic norm for the period. Image by Mongabay using INPE data.



Deforestation for the January 1-October 31 period in 2019 is pacing well ahead of the historic norm for the period. Bolsonaro took office in January 2019. Image by Mongabay using INPE data.

The [surge of deforestation and burning](#) is the result both of the constant anti-environmental rhetoric and of concrete actions in dismantling the country's environmental agencies and effectively halting fines for illegal clearing. The rhetoric and institutional setbacks have been documented in detail in a paper published in *Environmental Conservation*.

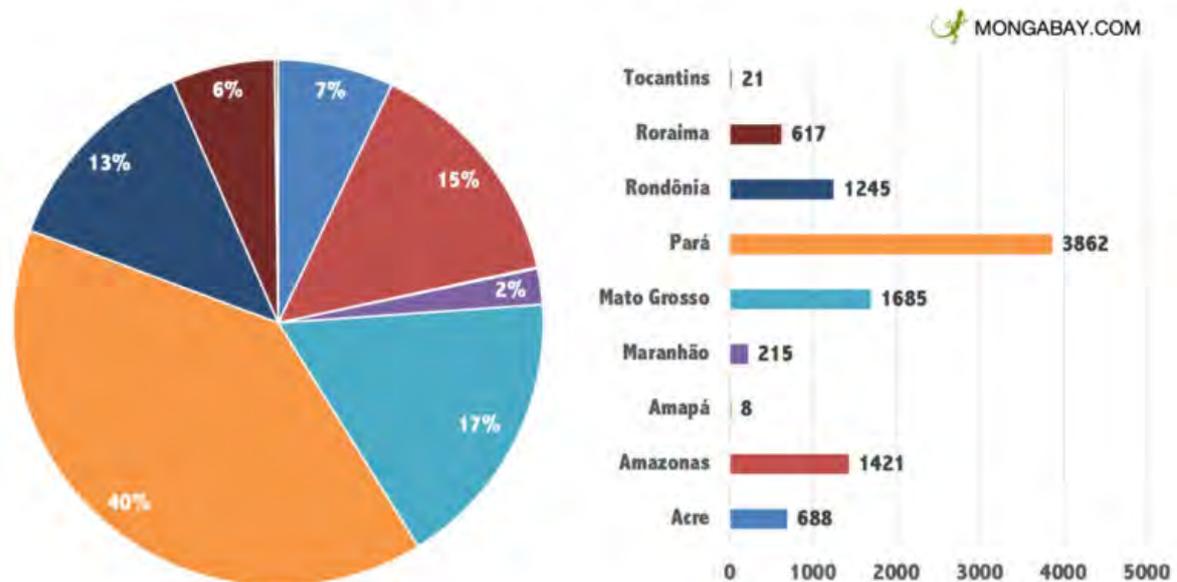
The discourse of the president and his minister of environment repeatedly suggest that environmental laws can be violated with impunity. A clear message was sent that there will be no consequences for such violations when the ministers of environment and agriculture [visited an illegal soy plantation](#) in an indigenous area in Mato Grosso, where they posed for photographs with the machinery and praised the operation.

People at the deforestation frontier do not follow the publication of decrees and laws in the government's official gazette or read the details of legal changes reported in major newspapers. Instead, their information comes from social media that rapidly spreads the news of each inflamed tirade by the president and his ministers against the government's environmental agencies and against environmentalists and environmental NGOs. It is the climate generated by this discourse that influences behavior. This year, many people caught red-handed violating environmental laws responded immediately that the president has "liberated" everything.

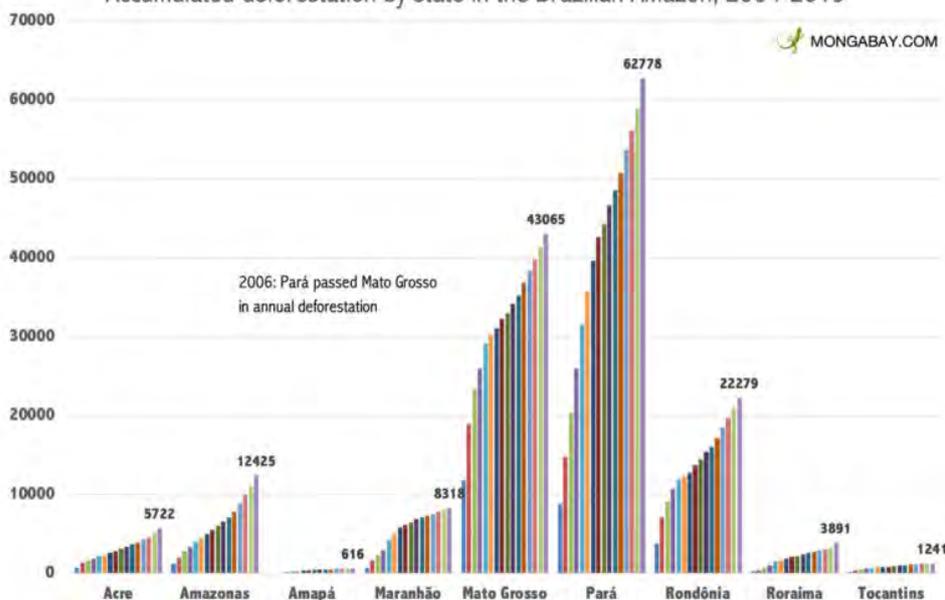
Deforestation has risen since 2012 due to the [continual increase in forces](#) driving forest loss, such as new and improved roads giving access to the forest, more population and more investment. The [indirect effect](#) of soy expansion has undoubtedly played an important role, with soy planters

purchasing many cattle ranches in Mato Grosso state, including ranches in the Cerrado savanna in addition to those in former Amazon forest. These ranchers use the money from the land sales to then buy much cheaper land in Amazon forest farther north, especially in the state of Pará, where they clear forest on a large scale to establish new ranches. Pará has been the biggest contributor to deforestation since 2006, when it surpassed Mato Grosso as the champion deforester.

Deforestation by state in the Brazilian Amazon in 2019 (sq km)



Accumulated deforestation by state in the Brazilian Amazon, 2004-2019



Accumulated deforestation from August 1, 2013 through July 31, 2019 for the Brazilian Amazon. Image by Mongabay using INPE data.

Prospects for 2020 are grim. The PRODES data for the nominal year “2020” will include the deforestation that has already occurred from August 2019 onward, which now totals 3,929 square kilometers (1,517 square miles) based on the DETER monitoring system. (The official total to be produced by the PRODES system will be even higher, since the DETER system misses some of the clearing.)

The rainy season has now begun, but when the dry season comes again in 2020 one can expect another surge in deforestation. Nothing has changed in the presidential administration’s discourse, and the dismantling of the country’s environmental institutions continues. Various planned roads, dams and other projects in Amazonia imply more deforestation.

Banner image: The Amazon rainforest on fire in August 2019. Most Amazon fires are intentionally set, often to clear new lands for cattle and crops. Image courtesy of Greenpeace.