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BR-319 illegal side road threatens Amazon protected area, indigenous land (commentary)

Commentary by Philip M. Fearnside; Lucas Ferrante and Maryane B. T. de Andrade on 27 March 2020



- *Brazil faces a critical decision on licensing Highway BR-319, in the Purus / Madeira river basins of Amazonas state, which would “chop the Amazon rainforest in half.”*
- *The highway would bring deforesters to vast areas of intact Amazon rainforest. Protected areas along the route have been created to avert spread of deforestation.*
- *However, an illegal side road is already being built connecting with the BR-319, and accessing one of those protected areas, while also threatening indigenous and traditional riverine communities.*
- *The construction of this illegal road dramatizes the fiction that governance measures would control on-the-ground events if the completed highway is licensed. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the authors, not necessarily Mongabay.*

Brazil's notorious [BR-319 \(Manaus-Porto Velho\) Highway](#) (Figure 1) is in the process of being improved (euphemistically termed “maintenance”) prior to authorization of the long-abandoned highway’s “reconstruction,” which is still awaiting an environmental license.

The road will allow deforesters to migrate freely from the “arc of deforestation” in the southern part of Brazilian Amazonia to vast areas of rainforest that have so far survived due to lack of access. As tropical rainforest ecologist Bill Laurance phrased it, the road will “[chop the Amazon rainforest in half.](#)” Extensive documentation on the impact of the planned reopening of the highway is available [here](#).

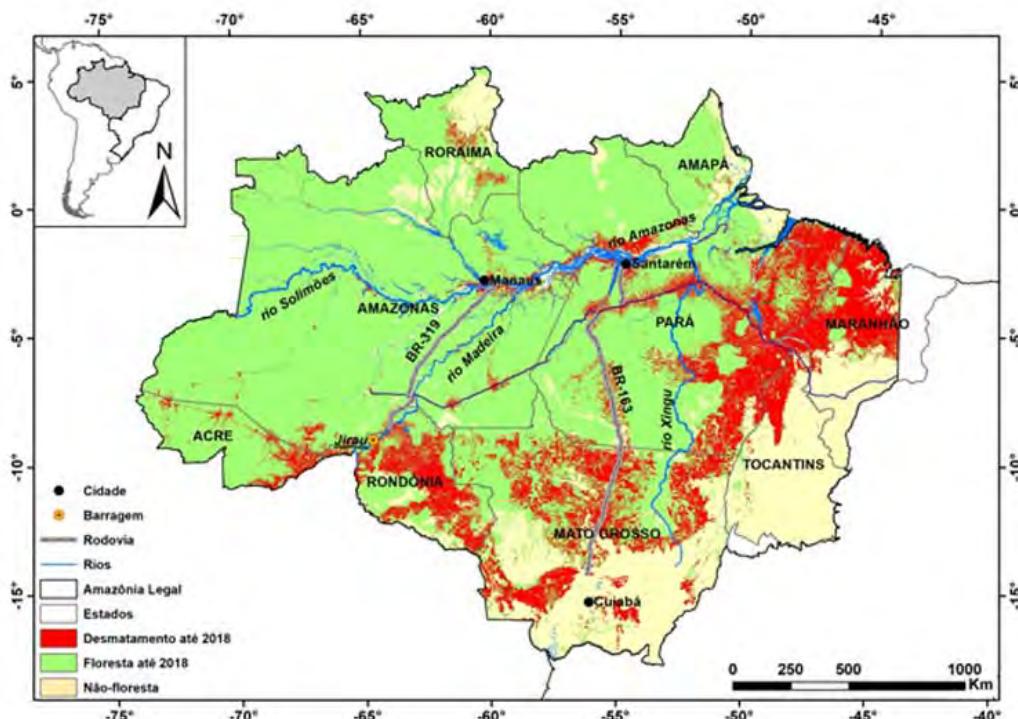


Figure 1. Deforestation in Brazil's Legal Amazonia region through 2018. BR-319 would connect the heavily deforested state of Rondônia to Manaus in Amazonas state. Deforestation data courtesy of Brazil's [National Institute for Space Research \(INPE\)](#).

Highway BR-319 cuts through a vast area of intact rainforest (Figure 2), but this is rapidly changing. One of the most-feared consequences of Highway BR-319 is the building of “spontaneous” illegal roads branching off both the main highway and off BR-319's officially planned side roads. Another fear is the invasion of a series of protected areas created along the highway to prevent deforestation. Now, both of these events are happening at once: an illegal branch road is being built from the edge of the BR-319 into a protected area.



Figure 2. The BR-319 (Manaus-Porto Velho) highway passes through large areas of intact rainforest, seen here in 2018 with road “maintenance” underway. Source: : [Folha de São Paulo](#).

Leaders in indigenous and traditional riverside communities (*ribeirinhos*) from the Lago do Capanã area (a lake in the municipality of Manicoré, in the Brazilian state of Amazonas) recently organized an event to discuss current and expected impacts of the reconstruction of Highway BR-319. The meeting, held on 2 March at the Manicoré Municipal Council, brought together 21 leaders. We presented lectures on the impacts of the highway, and the leaders contributed a series of testimonials and complaints.

One of the indigenous chiefs (who prefers not to be identified for fear of retaliation) presented a video showing a branch road that is currently under construction entering the Lago do Capanã Grande Extractive Reserve and approaching the Lago Capanã Indigenous Land (Figure 3). Both indigenous people and non-indigenous *ribeirinhos* traditionally collect Brazil nuts where the branch road is being built. The branch road already has a bridge, built at the end of February, made of the split trunk of a Brazil nut tree (Figure 4).

Indigenous peoples have [**not been consulted**](#) about the BR-319 reconstruction project as required by International Labour Organization (ILO) [**Convention 169**](#), of which Brazil is a signatory, and as required by Brazilian law. The government only plans to “consult” a small fraction of those impacted, and this would not be “prior” to a decision on the project but rather while the highway is being built. The government does not plan any consultation with non-indigenous traditional peoples, such as the *ribeirinhos* (the riverine residents) living legally inside the extractive reserve.

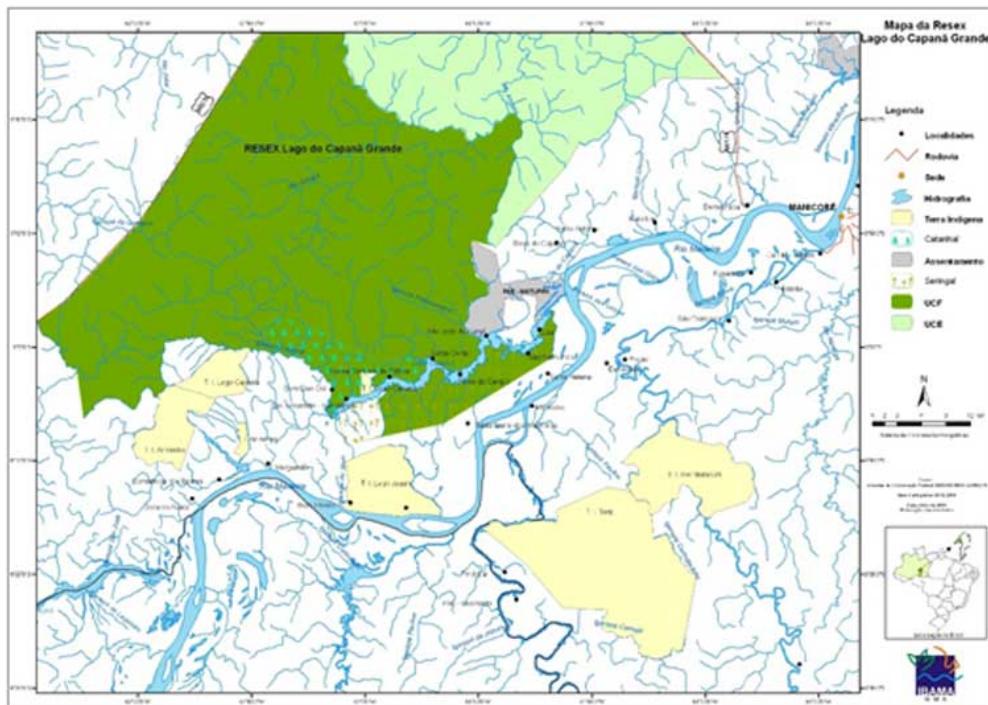


Figure 3. Map of the Lago do Capanã Grande Extractive Reserve showing indigenous lands. Source: [ICMBio](#).



Figure 4. Bridge made from the split trunk of a Brazil nut tree, part of the illegal road being built in the Lago do Capanã Grande Extractive Reserve. Image courtesy of indigenous leader whose identity withheld.

The indigenous and traditional riverside residents are alarmed by the possibility of violence by the builders of the branch road and the probable invasion of the area by land grabbers (*grileiros*) and other agents of deforestation. As Chief Ademor Leite Mura said, “Tomorrow this will be a field.”

It is not known who is financing the construction of the branch road.

The authors: Philip Fearnside is a research professor at Brazil's National Institute for Research in Amazonia (INPA). Lucas Ferrante and Maryane Andrade are post-graduate students at INPA supervised by Dr. Fearnside, the first in the Ph.D. program in Ecology, and the second in the Master's program in Tropical Forest Sciences. This text is modified from an earlier Portuguese-language version posted on *Amazonia Real* [here](#).

Full disclosure: Rainforest ecologist Bill Laurance, quoted in this article, currently serves on the Mongabay Advisory Council.