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Brazil's BR-319 highway: The danger reaches a critical moment (commentary)

Commentary by **Philip M. Fearnside** on 17 February 2024



- *A project to rebuild Brazil's notorious BR-319 highway is quickly moving closer to becoming a fait accompli. Together with planned side roads, BR-319 would open vast areas of Amazon rainforest to the entry of deforesters. A working group convened by the Ministry of Transportation will soon release a report intended to justify approval of the project's environmental license. Congressional approval of legislation to force granting the license is also looming.*
- *Despite a constant political discourse claiming that governance will contain deforestation and tourists will admire the forest from their cars as they drive on a "park road," the reality on an Amazon frontier is very different. Most of what happens once access is provided by road is outside of the government's control.*
- *The consequences of unleashing deforestation in the last great block of Amazon forest would be catastrophic for Brazil, threatening the water carried to São Paulo by the winds known as "flying rivers" and pushing global warming past a tipping point.*
- *An earlier version of this text was published in Portuguese by Amazônia Real. It is a commentary and does not necessarily reflect the views of Mongabay.*

The reconstruction of Brazil's BR-319 (Manaus-Porto Velho) highway (Figure 1) and its associated [hidden projects](#) are not yet a *fait accompli*, but the danger has

reached a critical moment. In November 2023, the President Lula created a [BR-319 working group](#) (GT) organized by the National Department of Highways (DNIT) to consider what measures can be adopted to make the reconstruction of BR-319 environmentally sustainable. In December, the project was added to the [Amazon Regional Development Plan \(PRDA\)](#) for 2024-2027, and the Chamber of Deputies [promoted a Bill](#) to “urgent” status to fast-track a measure that would force the licensing agency (IBAMA) to approve the BR-319 reconstruction project and the mandate the federal government to finance it. The interest groups involved have more than enough votes to approve this: as of February 2024 the [Agriculture and Ranching Parliamentary Front](#) (FPA) alone controls 324 of 513 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (63%) and 50 of 81 seats in the Senate (62%). In January 2024, the Executive Secretary of the Ministry of Transport assured the BR-319 GT that it is President [Lula’s commitment](#) to rebuild BR-319. The final report of the BR-319 GT is scheduled for February 2024, and should be released in the next few days. In his speech to the GT-BR-319, the [Executive Secretary](#) of the Ministry of Transportation stated that the objective of the GT report is to identify “the ways to resolve environmental licensing,” in other words, to justify the approval of the installation license for the BR-319 reconstruction project. There is clearly no intent for the working group to produce a neutral analysis to consider the question of whether the impact would be justifiable and whether the project should go forward after the proposed mitigation measures.

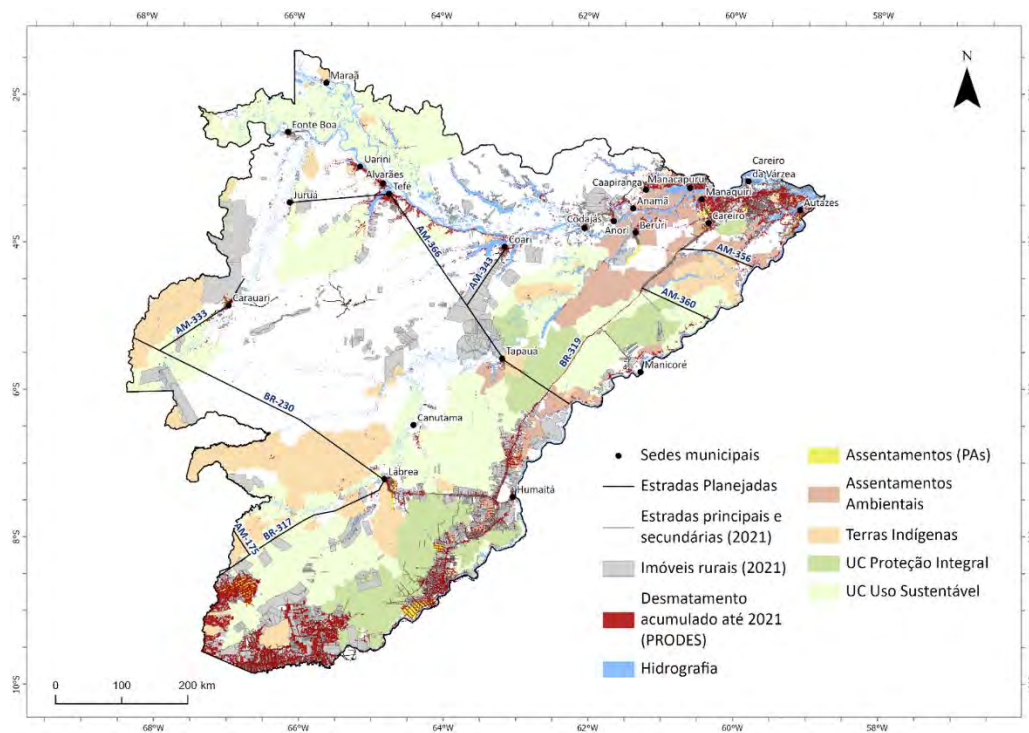


Figure 1. The BR-319 highway and associated planned side roads, such as AM-366 and AM-343, opening the Trans-Purus region to the entry of deforesters. The gray areas along the planned routes of AM-366 and AM-343 are records through 2021 in the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR), that is, areas claimed by land grabbers in anticipation of the construction of these roads linked to BR-319 (none of these claims are from the local resident population, as people living along the rivers in these areas lack internet access and technical skills to make georeferenced CAR claims online). Source: A.M. Yanai.

While the BR-319 GT discusses how to make BR-319 “environmentally sustainable,” it is important to be clear that this will not happen. The measures to be adopted would only alleviate a little of the impact along the route between Manaus and Humaitá, while much greater impacts would affect vast areas far from the road itself and would not be controlled even if the president of Brazil and the state governors had this as their first priority. These impacts were not even considered in the Environmental Impact Assessment ([EIA](#)) and are not part of the current discussions organized by DNIT. BR-319 would bring land grabbers, ranchers, farmers and loggers from the AMACRO region, which is now one of the main hotspots of deforestation in the Amazon (Figure 2). These actors would be able to spread to the entire area already connected to Manaus by roads and to the huge areas that would be opened by roads planned to be connected to BR-319, such as AM-366. The areas to receive these deforesters include [Roraima](#), which is famous as the state with the least environmental control. AM-366 would open up the [Trans-Purus region](#) – the vast forested area in the state of Amazonas west of the Purus River.

The Trans-Purus region includes the largest area in the Amazon of [undesignated public lands](#), which are the most attractive to [land grabbers](#) (*grileiros*) and other invaders. The side roads that would connect to BR-319, such as AM-366, are part of the impact of the BR-319 project, although politicians pretend that this is a separate problem. It is not separate, and the “[Friends of BR-319](#)” lobby is already pushing for AM-366. The side roads would be state highways, which means they escape from federal licensing and would be approved by the much laxer Amazonas state environmental agency. This offers little protection, as the governor can effectively order the agency to approve whatever he wants. This became embarrassingly clear in 2017, when illegal gold miners [burned down](#) the offices of the [federal environmental agencies](#) in Humaitá (on the BR-319 highway), upon which the [governor declared his support](#) for legalizing the mining and the state agency simply [authorized the arsons](#) to continue their mining activities. Various powerful interest groups would benefit from AM-366, including gas and oil companies (see [here](#) and [here](#)), [cattle ranchers and agribusiness groups from the AMACRO region](#), organized landless farmers (see [here](#) and [here](#)), and land grabbers (see Figure 1). What happens after providing road access is largely [outside the government’s control](#).



Figure 2. Burning in the AMACRO region, the major deforestation hotspot where the states of Amazonas, Acre and Rondônia meet, which will be connected to vast areas of intact forest by BR-319 and associated roads. Actors and processes from this region can be expected to move to areas opened by the project. Photo: Nilmar Lage/Greenpeace/30/08/2022

One of the topics under discussion is the creation of conservation units (protected areas for biodiversity). This is good, and many of them should be created quickly, before the areas are invaded and deforested. Some of these areas should be of the “full protection” type, but most could be of the “sustainable use” category, as long as they are not “environmental protected areas” (APAs), which allow private properties and offer almost no protection. All undesignated public forest areas should be converted into either conservation units or Indigenous lands, and nothing legalized as private property. This should not only be along the BR-319 route, but throughout the impacted area, including the Trans-Purus region.

Part of the discussion is about international experiences with roads that cut through preserved areas, which are seen as serving as models for BR-319. International examples have been used as an argument that declaring BR-319 a “park road” would eliminate deforestation. Unfortunately, this notion is completely unrealistic in the context of the Amazon frontier. The [first EIA](#) for BR-319 (produced in 2009 and later replaced by the current EIA) presented Yellowstone National Park, in the USA, as an example of what was expected for BR-319 with “governance.” It included (p. 205) a map of the roads in Yellowstone, where millions of tourists circulate, and no one cuts down a single tree. The [unreality of this scenario](#) for BR-319 would be difficult to exaggerate. This discourse continues: in August 2023 the [Minister of Transport](#) declared that BR-319 will be “the most sustainable and greenest highway on the planet.” The deforesters attracted by BR-319 do not behave like tourists, and the [imagined “governance”](#) does not control them in practice.

The best example is the reconstruction of the BR-163 (Santarém-Cuiabá) highway, which was licensed in 2006 based on the hypothesis that the “Sustainable BR-163 Plan” would avoid deforestation. This program included 32 non-governmental organizations plus the federal government and had the participation of some of the best environmentalists and academics in the country. The then environment minister, Marina Silva, declared that BR-163 would be a “corridor of sustainable development.” The real history that unfolded did not follow this scenario: the area became, and still is, one of the Amazon’s [biggest hotspots](#) of deforestation, land grabbing, illegal logging, and “wildcat” mining. In 2019, a “[day of fire](#)” was organized from Novo Progresso, on BR-163, when ranchers across the Amazon agreed to burn on the same day to show President Bolsonaro that they were “developing” the Amazon. BR-163 generated the [invasions](#) of the [Baú Indigenous Land](#), the land grabbing in the [Jamanxim National Forest](#), and the [side roads](#) giving access to the western half of the *Terra do Meio* (a forest area the size of Switzerland).



BR-230, also known as the Trans-Amazonian Highway; the R-163 Cuiába-Santarém road; and the BR-319 Manaus-Porto Velho road, shown here, are official roads that cut across the Amazon and have spawned a network of illegal offshoots. Image courtesy of the National Department of Transport Infrastructure (DNIT).

The risks in the BR-319 reconstruction project are enormous, and the Brazilian government does not and will not have the capacity to contain the impacts over a time horizon that goes far beyond any political mandate. The cost would be astronomical to control the situation in the entire area that would receive the impacts. What is the plan to control deforestation in Roraima and the Trans-Purus region? The risks jeopardize Brazil’s most basic national interests, including sustaining the [city of São Paulo](#). The forest in the Trans-Purus region, which is threatened by AM-366, AM-343 and other projects linked to BR-319, is the main

source of water for the country's largest city, and the recycling of water through the forest in this area is key to supplying water vapor to the winds known as "[flying rivers](#)" that carry water to the Brazilian Southeast where São Paulo is located. Research indicates that [70% of the water](#) in the river basin that includes São Paulo [comes from the Amazon](#). Maintaining the forest in the area threatened by the BR-319 project is also key to preventing global warming from passing a tipping point and escaping human control, which would be [catastrophic for Brazil](#), leading to major droughts and fires, floods, loss of the Amazon forest, desertification of the country's Northeast region, major typhoons and rising sea levels on the Brazilian coast, major losses for agribusiness and family farming, and unbearable temperatures for the human population in many locations.

The benefits of BR-319 have been incessantly exaggerated. The highway is not economically justifiable, as transporting products from factories in the Manaus Free Trade Zone to markets in the Southeast region is [much cheaper by water](#) than it would be by the highway. BR-319 is the only major infrastructure project in the country that [does not have](#) a Technical, Economic and Environmental Feasibility Study ([EVTEA](#)), or its predecessor, the *Technical and Economic Feasibility Study (EVTE)*. *Despite the long [history of excuses](#) for not having an EVTE, the real reason is obvious: the project is [not economically viable](#), even without considering its enormous environmental costs. The [first EIA](#) (p. 216) even admitted that "representatives of Manaus industries have indicated that, at the moment, the highway would be of low importance for the Manaus Industrial Pole". *One should not be fooled by political discourse about a non-existent governance utopia. Risking the impacts of this project is too dangerous.**

An earlier version of this text was published in Portuguese by [Amazônia Real](#).

Header image: Generated image showing a road through a deforested landscape.