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# **DEFORESTATION IN AMAZONIA: RESPONSE TO FISHER AND ALVES**

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I am glad that the researchers from Maryland agree with my conclusions both on the necessity of slowing deforestation and the potential effectiveness of the measures suggested in my article "A Prescription for Slowing Deforestation in Amazonia" (Fearnside, 1989). They give an accurate description of the sensibilities of many Brazilians to being lectured from abroad on how to develop Amazonia.

In this case, however, *Environment* cannot be criticized for providing too much unsolicited advice, as the article in question is a translation of a paper that I presented at the annual meeting of the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science (SBPC) in 1988. The original Portuguese language version is being published by one of the groups that has been most forceful in defending Amazonia against foreign interference: the National Campaign for the Defense and Development of Amazonia (CNDDA) (Fearnside, nd-a). It is well to remember that Brazil and the Brazilian government contain a diversity of views rather than a single "Brazilian perspective" -- I, after all, am a Brazilian government employee. It is healthy for the readers of *Environment* to be exposed to some of the debate underway in Brazil on the subject of deforestation. Although the article was written from the perspective of what Brazil can do (the original title was "How Brazil could Slow Deforestation in Amazonia"), people in other countries can also do many things to help slow deforestation; these have been reviewed elsewhere (Fearnside, nd-b).

It is true that advice from abroad is often rejected in Brazil, and that historical parallels with the destruction of natural ecosystems in North America are frequently invoked as rationalizations. These parallels ignore key differences between North America and Amazonia and, in any case, are not legitimate arguments. Clearing natural ecosystems in the central United States resulted in agriculture that, in many cases, has produced annual crops continuously for over a century on the same fields. In contrast, fields cleared from Amazonian forest typically produce annual crops for only one or two years, followed by cattle pasture that produces virtually nothing after less than a decade. The fact of widespread environmental destruction from the European occupation of North America in no way justifies following the same course in Brazilian Amazonia. To imply that suggestions in North American publications such as *Environment* are made suspect by the history of the United States would amount to simple *argumentum ad hominem* -- the logical fallacy of attacking the source rather than the argument. While Fisher and Alves are careful not to endorse repeating North American history in Brazil, it must be stated clearly that the argument is fallacious. It would not matter if it were Bozo the clown telling the Brazilian government not to convert the Amazon forest to cattle pasture: maintaining substantial tracts of forest remains the correct conclusion from the standpoint of long-term benefit of the Brazilian people (see Fearnside, 1989b). It is Brazil itself that stands to lose the most from deforestation -- no sentiments of "paradise lost" on the part of other countries need be invoked.

The commentators suggest that allowances must be made for Amazonia's "dark romantic allure" as a motive for Brazilians taking up the spirit of "Go west, young man." I think, however, that removing the windfall profits from land speculation, fiscal incentives and other nonproductive investment channels would go a long way towards dampening the spirits of some of the most destructive agents of deforestation in Brazil.

I am glad that my analysis of the problem was considered "cold." It is difficult to muster much warmth for the investors who would be deprived of short-term profits by implementing the measures suggested. My compassion is not aroused when the commentators state that "businesspeople from the towers of São Paulo to the beaches of Rio cannot afford to miss opportunities for investment." It is the poor migrants and residents of the region who deserve much more compassion than they have received so far from the Brazilian government. The measures proposed in my article would not affect clearing for subsistence crops by poor farmers in the region, and, by offering employment alternatives elsewhere, the measures would greatly improve the options available to potential migrants.

The idea that deforestation in Brazil is driven by "economic necessity" is misleading. From the perspective of individual poor farmers, of course, economic necessity looms large. Fortunately, small farmers clearing subsistence plots represent a relatively small portion of the deforestation taking place in the Brazilian portion of Amazonia. From the perspective of the Brazilian government, most deforestation is far from a "necessity": it is costing the country a great deal of money and is increasing its foreign debt faster than it generates returns to pay back the loans.

The Brazilian government is responsible for assuring the well-being of all Brazilians, including future generations and disadvantaged segments of society. One of the most important ways that the government could act to fulfill this responsibility is by taking effective measures to slow deforestation by removing the motives that now lead to rampant destruction of a potentially renewable resource in exchange for a landscape of rapidly degrading cattle pasture.

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