

Fonte: New York Times

> Relentless Foe of the Amazon Jungle: Soybeans

>

> September 17, 2003

> By LARRY ROHTER

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> CUIABÁ, Brazil - It takes only a trip on the busy but

> rutted highway that leads north from here to understand how

> an area of the Amazon jungle larger than New Jersey could

> have been razed over the course of just a year.

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> Where the jungle once offered shelter to parrots and deer,

> the land is now increasingly being cleared for soybeans,

> Brazil's hottest cash crop.

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> Soy cultivation is booming, driven by a coincidence of

> global demand from as far off as China and the local

> politics of state where the new governor was known as the

> Soybean King even before his election last October.

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> Today soybeans are eating up larger and larger chunks of

> the Amazon, leading to a 40 percent jump in deforestation

> last year, to nearly 10,000 square miles. Even the pastures

> where cows grazed until recently are being converted,

> pushing a cattle herd that has become the world's largest
> even deeper into the agricultural frontier.
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> "The new factor in the equation of Amazon deforestation is
> clearly soybeans and the appeal they hold for
> agribusiness," Stephan Schwartzmann, director of the
> Washington-based group Environmental Defense, said after a
> visit to the region in July.
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> A dry season that was unusually parched also appears to
> have figured in the surge in deforestation from August 2001
> to July 2002, according to the country's National Institute
> for Space Research. So did a certain laxness in law
> enforcement, traditional during an election year, and a
> weak currency that made farming for export especially
> attractive, analysts have suggested.
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> But experts are unanimous in warning that as soybean
> farming continues to spread through the adjacent southern
> Amazon states of Mato Grosso and Pará, the threat to the
> Amazon ecological system is likely to worsen in the next
> few years.
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> Environmental groups had hoped that Brazil's left-wing
> president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, would take steps to

> combat deforestation. But Mr. da Silva has instead

> emphasized increasing agricultural production to swell

> exports and feed the urban poor, a position that has earned

> him criticism even from allies.

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> "The Amazon is not untouchable," Mr. da Silva said during a

> visit to the region in July. That view is strongly

> supported by Blairo Maggi, the new governor here in the

> state of Mato Grosso, who has repeatedly dismissed any

> concerns about deforestation.

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> Mr. Maggi, elected last year as the candidate of the

> Popular Socialist Party, and his family own one of Brazil's

> largest soy producers, transporters and exporters. The

> Soybean King, as the Brazilian press is fond of calling

> him, advocates soybeans as an engine of growth and

> development in the Amazon.

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> In fact, Mr. Maggi has called for nearly tripling the area

> planted with soybeans during the next decade in Mato

> Grosso, whose name means dense jungle. His own company,

> Grupo Maggi, announced early this year that it intended to

> double the area it has in production.

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> "To me, a 40 percent increase in deforestation doesn't mean

> anything at all, and I don't feel the slightest guilt over

> what we are doing here," Mr. Maggi said in an interview at

> his office here in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso.

> "We're talking about an area larger than Europe that has

> barely been touched, so there is nothing at all to get

> worried about."

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> Economists say that the main spur to the soybean boom is

> the emergence of a middle class in China, much of whose

> newly disposable income has been spent on a richer, more

> varied diet. During the past decade, China has been

> transformed from a net exporter of soybeans to the world's

> largest importer in some years of whole soybeans as well as

> oil and meal byproducts.

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> At the same time, the recent outbreak of mad cow disease in

> Europe has led to a sharp shift away from using ground-up

> animal body parts in feed, further increasing demand for

> soy protein for cattle and pigs.

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> Initially, the planting was focused in savanna in the area

> that the Brazilian government defines as Legal Amazonia,

> but which is not truly forest. But as soy prices rise,

> producers are pushing northward into the heart of the

> Amazon, especially along the 1,100-mile highway called

> BR163, which links this city to the Amazon port of

> Santarém.

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> With Mr. da Silva's support, state governments in the
> Amazon are pushing to complete the paving of highway BR163,
> which scientists and economists say would accelerate both
> deforestation and soy cultivation. Mr. Maggi said an
> agreement had been reached to split the paving costs among
> private interests and the state and federal governments.

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> Mr. Maggi rejected the argument advanced by his critics
> that there is an inherent conflict of interest between his
> roles as governor and businessman. "It's no secret that I
> want to build roads and expand agricultural production," he
> said. "The people voted for that, so I don't see the
> problem."

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> The soybean producers who backed Mr. Maggi have been
> calling for some jungle areas to be reclassified as
> transitional land or savanna. Brazilian law permits
> landowners to raze trees and brush and plant crops on 20
> percent of their jungle holdings, but that figure rises to
> 50 percent in transitional areas and 65 percent in
> savannas.

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> During the interview, Mr. Maggi argued that the goal of

> more than doubling soybean production in his state over the
> next decade could be achieved "if we take full advantage of
> the deforestation ceiling of 20 percent without going
> beyond it." But most Brazilian and foreign experts
> disagree.

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> "It would be impossible for them to do that within the law"
> as currently written, said Dan Nepstad, an American
> scientist with the Amazon Institute for Environmental
> Research in Belém. "I suspect that is why they now want to
> play with the land classification scheme."

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> Much of last year's deforestation produced clouds of smoke
> so thick that some airplane flights had to be canceled. But
> beyond fouling the air with jungle burning, the rapid
> expansion of soybean production has also contributed to
> pollution of watersheds that feed into the Amazon,
> threatening isolated tribes.

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> Mr. Maggi says any pollution and deforestation problems are
> largely caused by thousands of poor families from other
> regions of Brazil that the federal government has settled
> on homesteads in remote areas of this frontier state.

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> Recent government research, however, indicates that only 17

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> percent of deforestation can be attributed to small peasant

> farmers trying to feed themselves.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/17/international/america/17BRAZ.html?ex=1064>

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