

Phil Fearnside's favorite perch is on a tower that sits nearly 214 feet above the canopy of the dense Amazon rainforest.

"As far as you can see in any direction, there is only rainforest. Not a clearing in sight." he said in an interview with mongabay.com, an environmental science and conservation news web site.

Phil is a research professor at the National Institute for Research in the Amazon in Manaus, Brazil. He is considered one of the leading authorities on climate change and has worked in the Amazonian rainforest for more than 30 years.

His unobstructed view of the forest that spreads below the tower north of Manaus, Brazil, is at once hopeful and tragic, showing a healthy untouched forest and contrasting with the parts decimated by development. "It is totally different from what you would see anywhere in the eastern and southern parts of Amazonia, where the forest has already been reduced to fragments," Phil says.

Saving the Amazonian rainforest has become Phil's life's work, and it's not much of a reach from his years at Colorado College and the years that followed.

In the summer between his junior and senior years Phil took a job as a ranger and naturalist at Glacier National Park, at the urging of CC biology professor Richard Beidleman. "Among the benefits of that experience was the public speaking it required – something I have done quite a bit of since," Phil says. "And working in Montana required having a car." That transportation came in handy during his senior year at CC, when he was responsible for chauffeuring speakers who visited CC for lectures.

"One of these was Marston Bates, a 'human ecologist' at the University of Michigan," Phil says. "He was instrumental in convincing me to study the ecology of humans, as opposed to birds (my original plan)."

As his senior year came to an end, Phil resisted efforts by Dr. Beidleman to convince him to take a job as a research assistant collecting soil mites in Antarctica.

"I was already set on going to India for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer."

That experience, Phil says, "was definitive in shifting my career from birds to humans."

Today, Phil works tirelessly in the Amazon. What happens there, he told Mongabay, "depends on human decisions. This includes not only the direct deforestation that is destroying the forest, but also the climate changes that threaten to destroy the forest even without further clearing."