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ENVIRONMENT

Amazonian Head Scratcher: How Deforestation Leads to Reforestation

It can take up to 100 years to replace biodiversity in deforested lands.

By Lawrence Karol December 6, 2012 Comment



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A soybean field on deforested land in Pará, a state in Northern Brazil's Amazon. (Getty Images/Getty)

Here are a couple of interesting facts about Amazon rainforests: One in five of all the world's bird species live in the Amazon and the forests contain 30 percent of all the flora and fauna in the world.

Those figures are particularly important in light of the more disturbing fact that a large number of industrial projects are transforming the Amazon into Brazil's fastest-growing region. *The New York Times* recently reported that, "Of the 19 Brazilian cities that the latest census indicates have doubled in population over the past decade, 10 are in the Amazon. Altogether, the region's population climbed 23 percent from 2000 to 2010, while Brazil as a whole grew just 12 percent."

As you might imagine, this has led to the continuation of widespread deforestation in a region that "already ranks among the largest contributors to global greenhouse-gas emissions."

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"Population, of course, is a fundamental factor affecting many developments, including deforestation," [Philip M. Fearnside](#), a researcher at the [National Institute for Amazon Research](#), told TakePart. "It is not only important how many people are involved, but who they are and where they go—as influenced, for example, by government decisions on road building."

For years, the Brazilian government has allowed colonization of the Amazon

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for security reasons. Starting in the 1970s, the country's military dictatorship encouraged people to move to its tropical woods. They used the nationalist slogan "occupy to avoid surrendering" to justify the inevitable consequence, which was that the settlements resulted in deforestation.

But can deforestation in some areas reduce forest loss in others? It's not an easy question to answer, but [Mitchell Aide](#), a University of Puerto Rico biology professor, led a group of scientists in a study that examined the topic.

Aide has lived in Puerto Rico for the last 20 years, and he told TakePart: "The dynamic here has been that forest cover has been dramatically reduced since the 1930s as socio-economic change led people to move to cities and abandon agriculture. But over the last 60 to 80 years, the forest has been recovering."

Aide said that most people wrote off the Puerto Rican reforestation as being an exception and that viewpoint was one of the motivations behind the research he and his colleagues undertook.

"The other is that virtually all studies only focus on deforestation and we thought it would be an interesting exercise to do an analysis of both and get a better relative idea of which is most important," he said. "Deforestation is the dominant pattern, but by ignoring reforestation no one had a clue if forests were coming back or not."

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“One of the things we’ve found is that changes in demography aren’t always a good predictor of whether a forest will return or not,” said Aide. “In some places, people move out of an area where there’s marginal land like steep slopes, but in other sections large agriculture keeps expanding. In the Amazon, there are small areas where forests have come back but the biggest dynamic is continued deforestation. There are regions, in the Andes for example, where forests are returning. But there are also places in Northern Argentina where even though the population has declined, the deforestation continues because it’s good land for growing soybeans.”

In terms of trying to take steps to reduce deforestation, Aide explained that the most important thing is to do large-scale planning and increase agricultural areas around the world. “But you’d like those new agricultural lands in areas that have already been deforested,” he said.

“We need to balance food production with biodiversity. In the areas where we’re seeing reforestation, it occurs mainly for economic reasons—small cultivators can’t compete and those lands are being abandoned. But it will take 50 to 100 years to replace the species diversity in those areas. So a better approach is to decide where to do land use activities, and to produce food where we can do it efficiently and leave the rest to biodiversity.”

Do you think there’s still hope that policies can be put in place to reduce deforestation and increase reforestation in the Amazon and other parts of the world?

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