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## DRAMATIC SPIKE IN AMAZON DEFORESTATION

For a quarter century, Brazil had the dubious distinction of being the **'world leader' in tropical deforestation**. Each year, an area of Amazon forest approaching the size of Belgium -- up to 3 million hectares -- was being destroyed.





Amazon rainforest under assault

Deforestation in the vast Brazilian Amazon finally began to decline around 2005. That was about the time that the [Catholic nun Dorothy Stang](#) -- who fought to defend indigenous peoples and the Amazon rainforest -- was brutally murdered by a wealthy Brazilian cattle baron.

Most Brazilians, of course, were outraged. President Lula sent the Brazilian army into the Amazon, and that seemed to mark the beginning of a dramatic decline in Amazon deforestation.

There was a [crackdown on illegal deforestation and burning](#). Long-existing environmental laws were finally being enforced. [New protected areas and indigenous lands](#) helped to stave off massive forest clearing. And [moratoria on forest clearing by big soy and cattle producers](#) helped.

As a result, annual deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon fell by at least 75 percent. Many in the world -- including [ALERT scientists](#) and the leading environmental website [Mongabay](#) -- heralded this as an example of improving forest governance in Brazil.

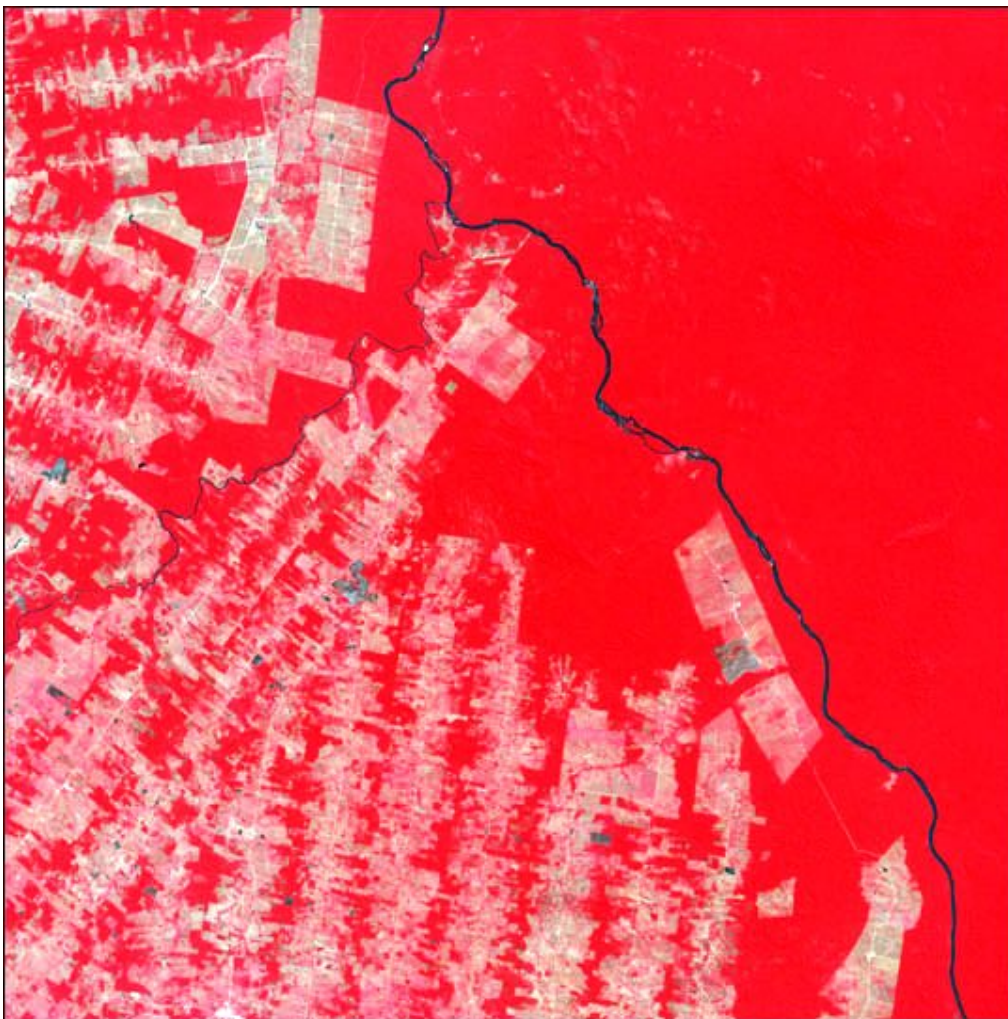
Well, the sad news is that the era of rampant Amazon deforestation may be returning.

According to a [recent letter](#) in the world-leading journal *Nature* by ALERT member Philip Fearnside -- arguably the world's greatest

authority on the Amazon environment -- the battle to slow Amazonian deforestation is far from over.

According to Fearnside, the Brazilian currency, the Real, has plummeted in value, making foreign exports such as soy, beef, and timber much more profitable. This, of course, promotes additional forest clearing.

Further, many new **legal** and **illegal** roads continue to expand apace in the Amazon -- opening a Pandora's box of environmental problems -- and the designation of new protected areas has effectively been frozen.



Roads to ruin in the Brazilian Amazon

In addition to all this, Brazil's annual expenditures on environmental enforcement have fallen by 72 percent, according to Fearnside.

As a result, deforestation rates, compared to last year, have **spiked dramatically**.

Does this herald a return to the 'bad old days' of slash and ruin in the Amazon?

According to Fearnside, "The forces that speed or slow Amazon deforestation are continually shifting, and downturns in clearing like the one we had from 2005 to 2014 can't be counted as a victory in the 'battle for the Amazon'".

And just last week, China announced a plan to punch a **5,300-kilometer railroad across the Amazon** -- impacting some of the most vulnerable and biologically rich areas of the basin.

"In the long term, the basic forces driving deforestation continue to grow," says Fearnside. "These include the building of ever more roads, the arrival of more and more people seeking land and more and more investment in agriculture, ranching and logging."

Clearly, we can't take anything for granted. The battle to save the Amazon is far from over.

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📅 May 31, 2015 / 👤 Bill Laurance

📌 Brazilian Amazon, deforestation, roads, railroad, Brazil, soy moratorium, protected areas, President Lula, Dorothy Stang, Philip Fearnside, illegal roads, cattle ranching, Brazilian exports

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