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Brazil's Amazon gold mining to be “stimulated” by Bolsonaro’s decree (commentary)



Commentary by **Philip M. Fearnside** on 22 February 2022

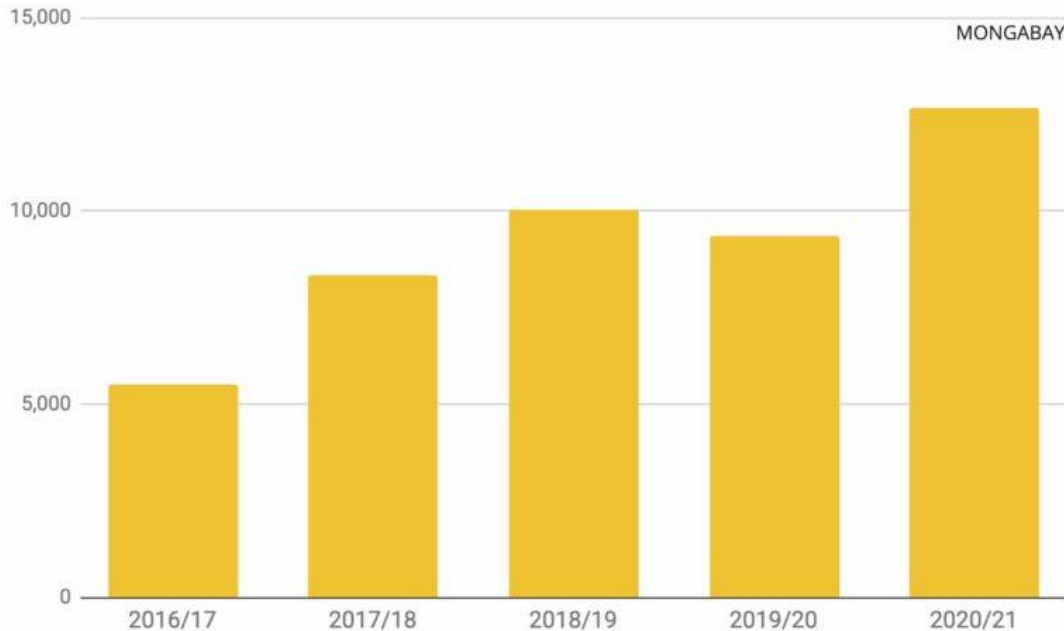
- *Brazil’s notoriously anti-environmental president has issued a decree instituting a program to stimulate “artisanal” gold mining. This mining is not really done by the small-scale individual prospectors that the name implies, but rather as part of operations backed by wealthy entrepreneurs, including politicians and organized crime.*
- *This gold mining, known as “garimpagem,” is often done by illegally invading Indigenous lands and is one of the greatest sources of impact on Amazonian Indigenous peoples. A bill submitted to the National Congress by President Bolsonaro would open Indigenous lands to this activity, and hundreds of requests for mining licenses in these areas have been submitted to the National Mining Agency by garimpeiro cooperatives in anticipation of these areas becoming available to legal mining.*

- *Despite the new decree describing itself as having a “view to sustainable development,” the severe environmental and social impacts of garimpagem, as well as the inherent unsustainability of mining, make a mockery of this claim.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

On February 11, 2022, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro published a [decree](#) establishing the Program for Supporting the Development of Artisanal Mining (Pró-Mape), which aims to “stimulate” this type of mining “with a view to sustainable development.” However, what would be stimulated is neither “artisanal” nor “sustainable development.” The vision of mining being carried out at the individual level is today, mostly mythological: “*garimpagem*” (usually translated as “wildcat mining”) in the Amazon is generally being carried out with expensive machinery and infrastructure, with the activity being commanded by entrepreneurs.

Almost all Amazonian gold mining is illegal, although there are “*garimpeiro*” cooperatives that can obtain licenses to do the activity legally thanks to a [1989 law](#). President Bolsonaro’s recent decree cites this law to define “artisanal mining,” which means that these legal entities would be “stimulated.” The number of these cooperatives [has exploded](#) since the beginning of the Bolsonaro presidential administration. [Recent investigations](#) have revealed that many of the licenses for *garimpeiro* cooperatives are just fronts to launder gold illegally taken from Indigenous lands and other locations far from the licensed site, and often the licensed sites where allegedly large amounts of gold were taken are, in fact, under dense forest without any visible activity. The shipment of gold abroad is [based on an export license](#) in which the supposed source of the product is self-declared, without any type of inspection. In addition, Brazil’s powerful drug gangs have recently been found to be [investing heavily in Amazonian gold mining](#), as well as in illegal logging and land grabbing (*grilagem*).

Annual deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon for mining since Aug 2016 (hectares)



Deforestation by year from mining between August 2016 and July 2021 in the Brazilian Amazon according to INPE.

Gold mining in the Amazon is one of the main sources of impact on Indigenous peoples, destroying watercourses and the fish that sustain the Indigenous populations, spreading diseases and disrupting the Indigenous groups both physically and culturally (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Gold mining releases large amounts of sediment into watercourses and also [releases mercury](#), which provides the cheapest way to separate the gold and is the source of highly toxic methylmercury affecting both human population and aquatic life. Mining in Indigenous lands is currently illegal, but bill PL 191/2020, if passed by the National Congress, would open Indigenous lands to mining, in addition to dams, agribusiness, logging and other activities done by non-Indigenous people. Hundreds of requests from *garimpeiro* cooperatives and other companies are pending at the National Mining Agency (ANM), awaiting the opening of Indigenous lands for this activity (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). PL 191/2020 is one of the bills for which President Bolsonaro asked the presidents of the two houses of the National Congress for priority in February 2021 when control of both houses was captured by the “*Centrão*” coalition that supports the President’s anti-environmental agenda (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Furthermore, stimulating mining has an impact on the country as a whole, and especially on the mining sites, through the “resource curse.” It is not by chance that the countries with the most fabulous mineral resources, such as Bolivia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are also the most miserable. There is a rich literature that explains this phenomenon (see [here](#)). *Garimpagem* and the other types of mining that are increasingly strong in the Brazilian economy tend to push the country in this direction.

The social and environmental impacts of “artisanal mining” are themselves reason enough to keep this activity off the list of what can be considered “sustainable development.” In addition, mining of any kind is inherently unsustainable since the minerals are being removed without replacement. The way to get around this problem proposed by the [Brundtland Commission](#), which launched the concept of “sustainable development” on the global stage, was to suggest that the income from the sale of minerals would have to be invested in programs that lead to an activity generating a source of sustainable income for the population after the ore is depleted (see [here](#)). Unfortunately, this basically never happens in reality. An example is provided by the depleted [manganese mine](#) in Amapá state in the northeast corner of Brazilian Amazonia.

President Bolsonaro’s new decree has been roundly condemned due to its likely impacts in Amazonia (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). However, *garimpeiros*, both workers and businessmen, form a favored part of President Bolsonaro’s electoral base and have received repeated benefits throughout his government. These include warm receptions by the President, who then launches criticisms of environmental agencies that try to curb the invasion of Indigenous lands and conservation units (protected areas for biodiversity) by these groups (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). The president has tried to [prohibit the destruction of machinery](#) when illegal exploitation is caught and has interfered with environmental agencies, including removing employees who repress mining (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Numerous internal rules within federal environmental agencies have been instituted at the stroke of a pen since Bolsonaro took office, reducing the ability of the staff in these agencies to repress illegal mining and other environmental infractions (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). The result has been a presumption of impunity and a massive surge in invasion of Indigenous lands by *garimpeiros* (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). It remains to be seen what can be done to mitigate the impact of the current decree and to reverse the decree once Pro- Mape becomes a *fait accompli*.

This text is updated from a Portuguese-language version published by [Amazônia Real](#).