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The deceptions of the Amazon Summit in Belém (commentary)

by Philip M. Fearnside on 17 August 2023



- *The summit of the eight Amazon countries held in Belém produced many statements of good intentions but no concrete commitments.*
- *No agreement was reached either on ending oil extraction in the Amazon or on ending deforestation, not even only “illegal” deforestation.*
- *Urgent but politically difficult topics were not discussed, such as foregoing plans to build roads opening rainforest areas and the need to end the legalization of land claims on government land.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

The fact that the eight Amazonian countries met and discussed deforestation is positive, although the results of the meeting were disappointing. The [final declaration](#) has a long list of good intentions for respecting Indigenous peoples, reducing environmental impacts and helping avoid climate change, but lacks any specific commitments with quantified targets and timelines. The word “sustainable” appears 88 times in the 113 numbered paragraphs in the declaration.

The countries [refused to agree](#) on any limit on deforestation, nor would they agree on banning oil extraction in the Amazon. Limiting deforestation is essential due both to its [year-to-year contribution](#) to global warming and due to its enormous [stock of carbon](#) in vegetation and soil that could pass global climate past a tipping point if any significant part of it is released.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was the principal impediment to a commitment to end oil extraction, an activity that must be reduced immediately and end by 2050 if global warming is to be controlled, as is even advocated by a decidedly non-environmentalist entity with representatives of the governments of over 120 countries: the [International Energy Agency](#).

In addition to the complete inconsistency of expanding oil extraction and the stated intentions of mitigating global warming, oil extraction also has tremendous [environmental impacts](#) in the Amazon. This is the case for the proposed “[Solimões Sedimentary Area](#)” project in Brazil’s state of Amazonas, which would lead to massive deforestation in conjunction with highway BR-319 and its associated planned side roads like AM-366.

In the case of Brazil’s proposed oil extraction in the estuary of the Amazon River, wells would be in water at depths up to double the depth at the site of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, which gushed oil for months and proved that [no one in the world](#) has the technology to control oil spills in such deep water.

What the countries agreed on were politically easy issues such as the items in the declaration “Urging developed countries to meet their obligations” to contribute more money to efforts to reduce deforestation, and “Condemning the proliferation of unilateral trade measures” that place environmental restrictions on imports that affect deforestation (i.e., soy, beef and timber). More contributions of money are indeed needed and can have a positive effect on reducing deforestation.



Heads of state celebrate after the Belém Declaration was signed on Aug. 9 at the Amazon Summit. The summit was convened by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (fourth from the left) to bolster regional alliances among the Amazonian nations. Image © Ricardo Stuckert/PR/Planalto Palace.

However, the resistance to import restrictions, if successful, would have the opposite effect, [eliminating an important influence](#) on policies that drive forest loss. Lula gave an indication of this two days before the summit in his visit to Brazil’s state of Amazonas: in a [radio interview](#) he mentioned the need to [avoid any “veto”](#) on Brazilian agribusiness products as a justification for establishing a special working group to assess whether the BR-319 reconstruction project should go ahead.

While money is important, halting deforestation requires more than money – it also requires political courage, and the influence of environmental criteria on imports can help generate that courage. Money can pay for much-needed command-and-control operations, and it is important that this be the priority for the use of the money and not politically easier but much less cost-effective actions like planting trees to restore already deforested areas.

Most important of all are politically difficult actions that were “elephants in the room” not dealt with at the meeting in Belém, such as commitments to not build roads that open rainforest areas to the entry of deforesters – most urgently Brazil’s planned reconstruction of [highway BR-319](#) (Manaus-Porto Velho) and [associated side roads](#) (especially AM-366 and AM-343).

Another “elephant in the room” in Belém was the need to [halt the legalization](#) of claims to government land in the Amazon (euphemistically termed “regularization” in Brazilian discourse). Legalizing these claims encourages an [endless chain of land-grabbing](#), land invasions and deforestation. It also results in legalizing both past and future deforestation, which represents the [easy way](#) to make good on Brazilian President Lula’s promise to end “illegal” deforestation by 2030, but without having to really stop deforestation.

Lula’s current discourse on ending “illegal” deforestation, including his proposal at the Belém summit, contrasts with his much-praised address to the 2022 COP in Egypt when he [promised to end deforestation](#) without appending the fatal qualifier “illegal.” Not even Brazil’s proposed Amazon-wide halt to “illegal” deforestation was agreed to in Belém. The impact of a hectare of deforestation has the same impact on climate and biodiversity whether it is legal or not.

Unfortunately, the major drivers of deforestation were not addressed at the Belém summit. These elephants in the room must be addressed quickly if we are to avoid crossing catastrophic tipping points.

Banner image: River in the Western Amazon. Photo credit: Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

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