

24/03/02

Dear Dan,

Thank you for your e-mail with your thoughts on the recent exchange in Science. I think the exchange was very healthy, and I hope you don't feel bad about the beating you took. After all, you're not the villains--they're in Brasília and Sapezál. And don't forget that we're not the villains either!

I don't view myself as a practitioner of "confrontational environmentalism." However, much of the information I produce is obviously useful for those who are. I was glad to hear of the progress with Paulo Silveira in doing future studies. Paulo Moutinho speaks very positively of that experience as well. Don't forget that our Science paper on the "Future of the Amazon" is also part of the reason for Silveira's new-found interest in impact studies.

I too think that offering alternatives is important, although I don't think that either researchers or environmentalists should be expected to have the answers to all of Amazonia's problems before they open their mouths and call a spade a spade when damaging projects are proposed. In my case, I have put considerable effort into environmental services, particularly carbon, as an alternative development strategy. The fact that the current powers that be in MCT and MRE reject that alternative can hardly be blamed on me. I also don't see the current rejection of that strategy as a fait accompli with the implication that now we should turn our efforts to making highways, pastures, etc. more ecological, and that failure to do so means that one offers no alternatives to the worst in Avanço Brasil.

I think that some of the differences that came out in the letters stem from a lack of care in some of your wording. Your original paper in Science was referring to not-yet completed projects as "inevitable", not to already existing projects like the rio Capim Hidrovia. We were addressing the issue of not-yet completed projects.

The question of when to consider something as inevitable or irreversible will always be controversial. Developers will always consider things as inevitable from the moment the plan is just a twinkle in someone's eye. Look at the history of Balbina for a good example of the strategy of proclaiming everything as "irreversible" from the start. Considering things as inevitable in advance can get well-meaning people into trouble on the environmental side. Look at how much trouble the World Bank got into in Rondônia, where they justified their financing by arguing that the BR-364 was inevitable since before it started. I saw this unfolding first-hand when the key Bank people were searching their souls at the time the decisions over POLONOROESTE were being made in 1979.

The problem of when, if ever, one should accept that "the bad guys have won so let's get down to collaborating with the victors" is always controversial. There were almost forty years of agonizing over how to deal with Franco's Spain. You may be too young to remember that, but, at the tender age of 20, Spain was my first experience with a real

dictatorship. Now I've experienced several others, including Brazil, Indonesia and China, plus briefer views of Idi Amin's Uganda and Mobutu's Zaïre. When I first came to work in Brazil in 1974 the dictatorship was still very much in its "heavy" phase. I took lots of pressure from my colleagues back in Michigan to not come here, on the basis that whatever I did would somehow help further both the dictatorship and the destruction of the Amazonian forest. I chose to work in Brazil anyway, and have never regretted it.

Anyway, the point is I'm probably not so purist as you think. When it comes to the biblical injunction to "walk not in the company of the ungodly," I do it all the time. But one does have to be careful not to forget who's who, and to be constantly aware of the line between walking with the ungodly and selling your soul. Remember that Faust didn't come out too well in his bargain. I'm glad you view yourself as always retaining the option to say "no" to disastrous projects. Remember that you only have that option in reality if you actually use it sometimes. Otherwise, it's like an alcoholic or a smoker saying they can quit any time, and that time never comes.

Don't worry about criticism of projects weakening initiatives for environmental governance. Everyone is for governance, along with motherhood. Efforts to support it, such as your work in Guarantã do Norte, are always for the good. Our letter tried to point out the dangers of the infrastructure projects without any implied criticism of working to support local efforts for governance in the same locations.

We need to talk more, and to collaborate more. That may sound like a motherhood statement, but we shouldn't let it stay that way.

By the way, let me renew my offer to deal with INPA on your behalf if you want to renew your soil pits in the Reserva Ducke or in other reserves. Also a cobrança: where are those numbers on root biomass you promise every time I see you?

Abraços,
Phil

cc: Bill Laurance