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### DEFORESTATION IN THE AMAZON

Philip M. Fearnside's article in the May 1989 issue, "A Prescription for Slowing Deforestation in Amazonia," represents the cold voice of reason. Fearnside has spent a large fraction of his life in the Amazon watching development creep across the land. Satellite photos reveal fingers of settlement spreading from new roads like fungal cultures in a giant Petri dish. The seriousness of this loss has galvanized some—like Fearnside—to enter the political fray to inject their vision of sanity into the process.

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is driven primarily by economic and political forces. From the landless poor to the glittering rich, the Amazon is the great frontier, the dark unknown, full of hope for economic miracles. Displaced people from the drought-stricken and then flood-washed northeast of Brazil have turned to Amazonia for a new and better life. Businesspeople from the towers of São Paulo and the beaches of Rio de Janeiro cannot afford to miss opportunities for investment. Government officials facing rushing inflation, the cost of imported fuels, and a burdensome national debt hope for economic salvation in the development of the Amazon. Can a developing nation struggling to reenact the economic miracle of the 1960s afford to preserve a large fraction of its vast northern frontier in the 1990s?

North Americans understand well the power and problems of land development. "Go West, young man!" has been a clarion call for generations. Settlement and development resulted in deforestation, soil erosion, and the displacement and betrayal of American Indians—all traded for booming economic development and a high standard of living. U.S. residents now jam national parks looking for the tattered remnants of natural splendors. It is from this perspective of a lost paradise that we urge Brazilians, Peruvians, and Colombians to slow development of the Amazon, control prospecting for oil and minerals, spare the forests, preserve the lands of native peoples, and develop a rational plan for sustained production.

There is a strong and growing environmental movement within Brazil, primarily in the more affluent and developed south. However, in Amazonia there is some strong local support for conservation. Witness, for instance, the outspoken activities in western Amazonia of Chico Mendes, who demanded preservation of the forest from the cattle ranchers who would obliterate the resources on which rubber harvesters and settlers depend. Such attitudes carry a high price, however; Mendes was murdered last year, probably by the ranchers he sought to stop.

History does not have to repeat itself. Having developed our own lands does not disqualify us from offering advice to those poised on the brink of developing their own. As a species, we must learn from our mistakes to avoid repeating them. However, the Brazilian perspective is not so clear-cut: Many times people cut the forest not to destroy it but as a matter of survival. The standard of living is very poor among settlers and conditions are difficult. In the long term, land conservation is in the best interests of these people, but few programs are available to assist them now because of their geographical isolation and the policies of the Brazilian government that favor development.

We applaud Fearnside's economic perspective for controlling deforestation. His suggestions for rational development and sustained production are logical and may indeed be examples of the fruits of history. His comments about assessing environmental impacts are particularly important. But the human side is missing from his prescription, the romantic allure and economic necessity that drive people into this frontier. Allowances for these factors might enhance the success of his proposals.

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I AM GLAD THAT Thomas R. Fisher and Luiz F. Alves agree with my conclusions on both the necessity of slowing deforestation and the potential effectiveness of the measures I suggested in the May issue. Fisher and Alves give an accurate description of the sensibilities of many Brazilians to lectures from abroad on how to develop Amazonia. True, advice from abroad is often rejected in Brazil, but Brazil and the Brazilian government contain a diversity of views rather than a single "Brazilian perspective"; I am, after all, a Brazilian government employee.

*The Commentary section is designed to encourage discussion of issues raised in the magazine. Letters to Commentary are welcomed. Points should be well supported and clearly presented. The editors reserve the right to edit for length.*

The historical parallels Fisher and Alves cite between Amazonian deforestation and the destruction of natural ecosystems in North America frequently are invoked as rationalizations. These parallels ignore key differences between North America and Amazonia and, in any case, are not legitimate arguments. Clearing natural ecosystems in the central United States resulted in agriculture that, in many cases, has produced annual crops continuously for more than a century on the same fields. In contrast, fields cleared from Amazonian forests typically produce annual crops for only one or two years, followed by cattle pasture that produces virtually nothing after less than a decade. Moreover, the widespread environmental destruction from the European occupation of North America in no way justifies following the same course in Brazilian Amazonia.

To imply that suggestions in North American publications such as *Environment* are made suspect by the history of the United States would amount to simple *argumentum ad hominem*—the logical fallacy of attacking the source rather than the argument. It would not matter if it were Bozo the Clown telling the Brazilian government not to convert the Amazon forest to cattle pasture: Maintaining substantial tracts of forest remains the correct conclusion for the long-term benefit of the Brazilian people. After all, Brazil stands to lose the most from deforestation—no sentiments of “paradise lost” on the part of other countries need be invoked.

Fisher and Alves suggest that allowances must be made for Amazonia’s “dark romantic allure” as a motive for Brazilians taking up the spirit of “Go West, young man.” I think, however, that removing the windfall profits from land speculation, fiscal incentives, and other nonproductive investment channels would go a long way toward dampening the spirits of the most destructive agents of deforestation in Brazil.

I am glad that my analysis of the problem

was considered “cold.” It is difficult to muster much warmth for the investors who would be deprived of short-term profits if the measures I suggested were implemented. My compassion is not aroused when the commentators state that “businesspeople from the towers of São Paulo and the beaches of Rio de Janeiro cannot afford to miss opportunities for investment.” The poor migrants and residents of the region deserve much more compassion than they have received so far from the Brazilian government. The measures proposed in my article would not affect clearing for subsistence crops by poor farmers in the region and, by offering employment alternatives elsewhere, would greatly improve the options available to potential migrants.

The idea that deforestation in Brazil is driven by “economic necessity” is misleading. From the perspective of individual poor farmers, of course, economic necessity looms large. Fortunately, the clearing of small subsistence plots represents a relatively small portion of the deforestation taking place in the Brazilian portion of Amazonia. From the perspective of the Brazilian government, most deforestation is far from a “necessity”: It is costing the country a great deal of money and is increasing its foreign debt faster than it generates returns to pay back loans.

The Brazilian government is responsible for assuring the well-being of all Brazilians, including future generations and disadvantaged segments of society. One of the most important ways that the government could act to fulfill this responsibility is by taking effective measures to slow deforestation by removing the motives that now lead to rampant destruction of a potentially renewable resource in exchange for a landscape of rapidly degrading cattle pasture.

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