



Bungle in the jungle

GHOST FOREST: Scattered stumps are all that remain of rainforest near Campo Verde after loggers moved through the area. REUTERS/NACHO DOCE

The world's largest rainforest faces renewed attack as Brazil rolls back years of environmental protections

BY PAULO PRADA
ITAITUBA, BRAZIL, AUGUST 3, 2012

Ivo Lubrinna has been wildcatting for gold in the jungle here for more than 30 years. It's a notoriously messy business, as crews strip away topsoil in the forest and along riverbanks and use mercury and other pollutants to draw precious metal from mud.

For the past two years, Lubrinna has held a second job: environment secretary for this riverside city of 100,000 people, gateway to the oldest national park and half a dozen nature reserves in Brazil's vast Amazon wilderness. As such, it's his job to protect the area from the depredations of loggers, poachers, squatters – and gold miners.

His dual role neatly divides his workdays: morning as regulator, afternoon as miner. "I have to be good early

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INROADS: Loggers recently shaved a swath of virgin rainforest near Amazonia National Park (left); children now play in a deforested area near former parkland that was modified to legalize squatter camps.. **REUTERS/NACHO DOCE**

in the day,” the burly, bald 64-year-old says in his stand-at-attention baritone. “In the afternoon, I watch out for myself.”

Until recently, the seeming conflict of interest wouldn't have mattered much in this free-for-all frontier of lax law enforcement and often-violent conflicts among interests competing for land and resources. It was the job of Ibama, Brazil's widely respected federal environmental agency, to police the Amazon as best it could.

But last year, President Dilma Rousseff authorized a change that ceded much responsibility for environmental oversight to local officials. Of 168 Ibama field offices operating a few years ago, 91 have been shuttered, according to Ibama employees. Lubrinna says Ibama agents used to fine him and other miners for violations. Now, he leads a team

that inspects wildcatting sites. So far, he says, he has levied few fines.

The shift to local control is one of many changes implemented under Rousseff's administration that, taken together, constitute an all-out retreat from nearly two decades of progressive federal environmental policy.

In the 19 months since Rousseff took of-

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dams are to be built in the Amazon region through 2021 under current Brazilian government plans.

fice, longstanding rules that curtail deforestation and protect millions of square kilometers of watershed have been rolled back. She issued an executive order to shrink or repurpose seven protected woodlands, making way for hydroelectric dams and other infrastructure projects, and to legalize settlements by farmers and miners.

And she has slowed to a near halt a process, uninterrupted during the previous three administrations, of setting aside land for national parks, wildlife reserves and other “conservation units.”

The president is clear in her reasoning: Unleashing further development in the Amazon rainforest, an area seven times the size of France, is essential to maintaining the sort of economic growth that over the past decade lifted 30 million Brazilians out of poverty and

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made Brazil the world's sixth-largest economy.

The government intends to build 21 dams in the Amazon through 2021 at a cost of 96 billion reais (\$48 billion), as planned under Rousseff when she was still working for her mentor and predecessor, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The dams are necessary, she says, to meet the energy demands of Brazil's growing consumer class.

And Brazil still has 60 million people living in poverty. "I have to explain to people how they are going to eat, how they'll have access to water, how they'll have access to energy," she said in a speech in April.

That message resonates with many Brazilians. Rousseff enjoys an enviable approval rating of 77 percent, according to a June poll.

She also received 83 percent of her campaign contributions for the 2010 election from corporations, mostly food, agriculture, construction and engineering businesses poised to benefit from opening the Amazon wider to development, according to a review of electoral filings by José Roberto de Toledo, a blogger and data analyst.

Rousseff aides dismiss any suggestion of a quid pro quo; other candidates received funds from the same companies in similar proportions.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Brazil's well-established environmental movement is aghast. Rousseff's policies, they say, endanger the world's largest rainforest, the storehouse of one-eighth of the planet's fresh water, a primary source of its oxygen and home to countless rare and undiscovered plant and animal species, as well as tens of thousands of native tribespeople. The short-term economic gain, Rousseff's critics say, isn't worth the potential long-term cost to the global environment, as well as Brazil's economy.

"This is a government willing to sacrifice the resources for thousands of years in exchange for a few decades of profit," says Marina Silva, a former environment minister and a pioneer of Brazil's green movement.

Already, the rush to exploit the region has spawned flashpoints.

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Dilma Rousseff

President of Brazil

The best-known is Belo Monte, a 26 billion real (\$13 billion) project to build the world's third-largest dam on the Xingu River, an Amazon tributary in Pará, the state where Itaituba is located.

The subject of intense media coverage, court challenges, and high-profile opposition from the likes of Hollywood director James Cameron, Belo Monte will displace thousands of tribespeople. It is already luring thousands of migrants to the jungle outpost of Altamira, transforming it into a boomtown where prices for food and real estate have more than doubled in the past year.

In Acre, the westernmost state in the Brazilian Amazon, the retreat of Ibama agents has opened the door to incursions and infighting among loggers and drug traffickers from nearby Peru, threatening Serra do Divisor, a park created a decade ago.

And in the northeastern state of Maranhão, ranchers, loggers and natives clash frequently around the Gurupi wildlife reserve. There, illegal logging has affected as much as 70 percent of the reserve's woodland, a process that scientists say is hastening expansion of the more arid climate in Brazil's far northeast.

The dynamics set in motion by Rousseff's policy shift are on full display in and around Amazonia National Park, a Jamaica-size chunk of forest on the west bank of the Tapajós River.

Amazonia was Brazil's first national park in the Amazon region, established in 1974 by the nation's military dictatorship to mitigate the impact of policies that had encouraged poor migrants to settle in the area.

In the late 1980s and through the next decade, the park benefited as Brazil's young democratic government embraced an environmental policy considered one of the



TOUGH TALK: President Dilma Rousseff argues that opening the Amazon to development is essential to meeting the needs of Brazil's citizens. **REUTERS/UESLEI MARCELINO**

most aggressive at the time, enforced by federal agents. In the past decade, President Lula stepped up policing of parklands, slowing deforestation to its lowest rate on record.

But the economic boom Lula presided over took its toll. As Brazil became the world's biggest exporter of beef and soybeans, rainforest succumbed to clearcutting for agriculture. In the rolling hills near Itaituba, logging and mining continued – some of it legal, some not.

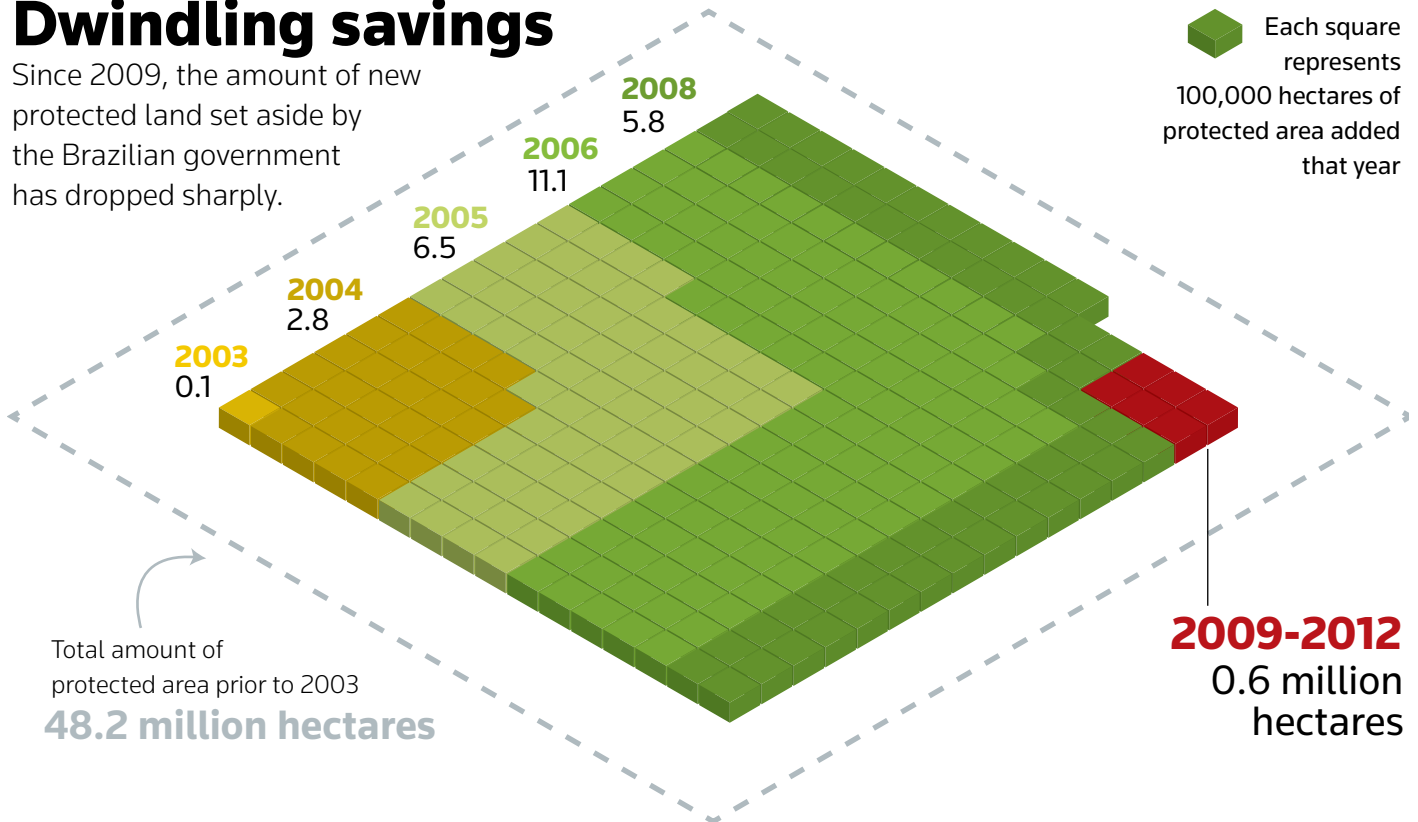
To impose order, the government in 2006 created a buffer zone of six reserves on nearby land – an area more than six times the size of the Amazonia park itself – where activity could be regulated.

When Maria Lucia Carvalho took up her new job as manager of Amazonia park three years ago, she was eager to attract more visitors and crack down on abuses. With Ibama agents nearby to help her park staff to deal with persistent squatters and poaching, "I was really hopeful," she says.

The feeling didn't last long. In early 2010,

Dwindling savings

Since 2009, the amount of new protected land set aside by the Brazilian government has dropped sharply.



she heard rumors that one of Rousseff's dams was to be built inside the park, on the Tapajós rapids. At a point where the river is three-kilometers wide, the rapids are renowned as a habitat for many species of exotic fish, a key transit point for migratory catfish, and a source of water for endangered wildlife including jaguar and the *ararajuba*, or golden parakeet.

A few months later, park agents caught workers for the state-run electric company conducting unauthorized survey work in the area and fined them.

After Carvalho spoke out on TV against the project, she was summoned to Brasília, the capital, by the head of the national park service. "I was told this is a government plan, and that I am the government, and that I could therefore not criticize the project," she says.

The park service declined to comment on the meeting.

In December last year, Rousseff signed the law that gives state and local governments ultimate authority over non-federal lands. In

Brasília's view, locals are better-positioned to ensure that loggers, miners and others who tap forest resources are doing so with proper licenses in permitted areas.

Others, however, say local authorities lack the resources needed to police the Amazon and are more susceptible to intimidation and bribes. Scale alone makes enforcement a challenge in the Amazon.

Within months, Ibama forestry agents in Itaituba left, leaving Carvalho and park service colleagues on their own to police the area – but for Lubrinna, the Itaituba environ-

“The government creates laws that are difficult to follow. ... People like me need to make a living.”

Ivo Lubrinna

Itaituba environment secretary and wildcat gold miner

ment secretary who also happens to be a gold miner, and his small staff.

Lubrinna spends as much time overseeing his mining crews as he devotes to his municipal post, he says. He declined repeated requests to show a Reuters reporter his own wildcatting operation. He describes it as a 180-square-kilometer spread southwest of Itaituba – most of it in national forest.

Mining permits there are hard to come by, he says, and his permits don't cover the entire area where he operates. "The government creates laws that are difficult to follow," he says. "People like me need to make a living."

Rousseff recently touted figures showing that the rate of deforestation in the Amazon fell to a record low in the 12 months ended July 2011, the most recent yearlong period for which data is available. Total land cleared – about 6,400 square kilometers, roughly the size of the state of Delaware – was down 77 percent from 2004, a trend that preliminary data suggests has continued in recent months.

Critics say it's still too early to see the impact of the president's agenda. "The numbers are bound to go in the other direction," says Adriana Ramos, an executive at the Instituto Socioambiental, an activist group. "They are changing the architecture of regulations that led to the decrease in the first place."

The foundation of that architecture is Brazil's "forest code," a set of laws unchanged for decades that lays out the percentage and type of woodland farmers, timber companies and others must leave intact when cutting.

Brazil's powerful farm lobby has successfully pushed for changes that earlier this year made it through Congress. Though Rousseff vetoed parts of the bill that would have granted amnesty for past abuses, she is negotiating with lawmakers over changes environmentalists fear could make it easier to clear timber in areas that until now were off limits.

When a park ranger recently visited José Lopes da Silva, a squatter in the eastern margin of Amazonia park, the farmer complained about a 15,000 real (\$7,500) fine he received last year for cutting trees abutting his corn field. "Why did I get fined," he asked, "if they are about to change the law?"

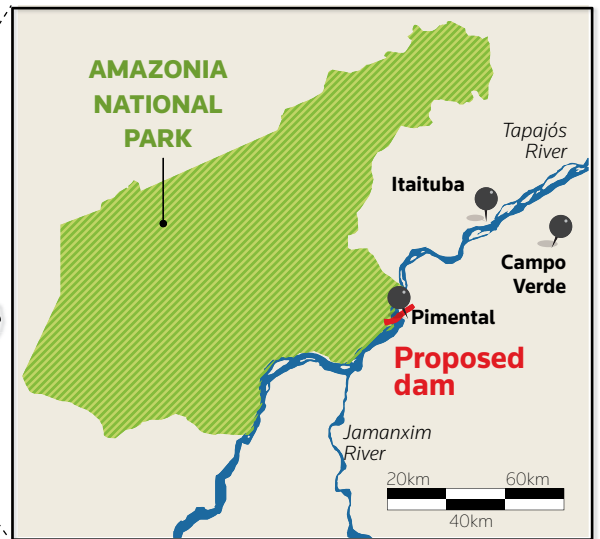
"The law is still the law," the ranger responded.

Near Campo Verde, a truck stop 30 kilometers southeast of Itaituba, Jeeps and beat-up pickups move along the highway by day. After nightfall, big-rig trucks emerge from logging paths cut deep into protected areas. Laden with tree trunks larger in diameter than the trucks' wheels, the rigs race westward toward lumberyards along the Tapajós.

With few federal agents on the ground left to patrol the reserves, the destruction becomes apparent only once the area is big enough to be detected, cloud cover permitting, by satellites or rare and costly aerial surveillance. Because the state government grants the licenses for the lumberyards, federal officials inspect them less frequently now, too.

"What's the point if we're no longer the senior authority?" says one federal agent who asked not to be identified.

Flashpoint by the river



President Dilma Rousseff recently changed longstanding rules for environmental enforcement and signed a law allowing a dam in Amazonia National Park, one of at least 21 now planned in the Amazon.

Source: Brazilian national park service

The job is also increasingly dangerous as landowners, loggers, and their henchmen clash over the jungle's bounty. In March, gunmen ambushed park service agents returning from a raid on an illegal logging camp in a nature reserve south of Itaituba. The agents managed to fend off the attack.

Last year, assassins killed a prominent environmental activist in Pará and his wife after the couple decried illegal logging near their home.

João Carlos Portes, a Catholic priest in Campo Verde, said gunmen recently threatened to "spray the congregation with bullets" after he refused to allow a funeral mass for a logger and confessed killer murdered by rival loggers.

Portes, who is also the local representative for the Pastoral Land Commission, a religious group focused on reducing violence, slave labor and other abuses in rural Brazil, says the recent changes in environmental policy mean "things here are only going to get worse."

In January, Rousseff announced her executive order that slices chunks of territory from Amazonia and six other reserves to make way for dams and legitimize illegal settlements. Even though the measure still faces several court chal-

After nightfall, big-rig trucks emerge from logging paths cut deep into protected areas, laden with tree trunks larger in diameter than the trucks' wheels.



GIVING UP: Maria Lucia Carvalho had grand ambitions for protecting Amazonia when she started her job as the park's manager, but they didn't last long. REUTERS/NACHO DOCE

THE AMAZON BUNGLE IN THE JUNGLE



FOR PROGRESS: Young cowboys (above, left) tend their herd on a patch of recently cleared land near Campo Verde; a federal agent (above, right) inspects illegally harvested logs confiscated in Pará state; these children (below) are among the 800 people of Pimental whose village is likely to be flooded by a dam planned for the area. **REUTERS/NACHO DOCE/LUNAE PARRACHO/NACHO DOCE**



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ON THE ROAD: Settlers live alongside a road cut through the jungle in the 1970s, when nearby Amazonia park was created to mitigate the impact of the government's push to develop the region. **REUTERS/NACHO DOCE**

lenges, Congress signed it into law in June.

The hydroelectric dam on the Tapajós River will inundate a large swath of woodland upstream, as well as Pimental, a village of about 800 fishermen and small farmers on the eastern bank of the river at the dam site.

Villagers are angry that the government has yet to provide details about the dam, whether they will be moved or compensated, or how the process might unfold. "We are completely in the dark," says Luiz Matos de Lima, a 53-year-old farmer and grocer in Pimental.

Some villagers recently chased contractors for the electric company out of town and destroyed concrete markers the workers placed in the area.

Brazil's energy ministry says final details for the project, planned for completion in 2017, are still under study.

It was Rousseff's authorization of the dam that sapped what remained of Carvalho's en-

“We are completely in the dark.”

Luiz Matos de Lima

resident of Pimental, a village affected by plans for a dam on the Tapajós River

thusiasm for her job as the Amazonia park's manager. Recently, she put in for a transfer, seeking a park post in Brazil's arid northeast.

"They can't build a dam there," she says, "but who knows – maybe they'll build a nuclear plant."

Meanwhile, last month, Ibama agents at the airport in Belém, the capital of Pará, detained a man they found traveling with a Styrofoam cooler containing the frozen 22-pound carcass of an endangered Amazonian turtle. The agents seized the carcass, fined the man 5,000 reais (\$2,500), and filed criminal charges against him.

The turtle-toting traveler: Ivo Lubrinna.

The Itaituba environment chief told agents the turtle meat was to be served at a party for his son. Lubrinna says he will contest the fine and the charges in court.

He notes, too, that though the turtle is endangered, eating it, in the Amazon region, is "culturally acceptable."

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