

Documentação	
Fonte	The New York Times
Data	17/09/2003 Pg
Class.	AAGR0096

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The New York Times
nytimes.comPRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
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September 17, 2003

Relentless Foe of the Amazon Jungle: Soybeans

By LARRY ROHTER

CUIABÁ, Brazil — It takes only a trip on the busy but rutted highway that leads north from here to understand how an area of the Amazon jungle larger than New Jersey could have been razed over the course of just a year.

Where the jungle once offered shelter to parrots and deer, the land is now increasingly being cleared for soybeans, Brazil's hottest cash crop.

Soy cultivation is booming, driven by a coincidence of global demand from as far off as China and the local politics of state where the new governor was known as the Soybean King even before his election last October.

Today soybeans are eating up larger and larger chunks of the Amazon, leading to a 40 percent jump in deforestation last year, to nearly 10,000 square miles. Even the pastures where cows grazed until recently are being converted, pushing a cattle herd that has become the world's largest even deeper into the agricultural frontier.

"The new factor in the equation of Amazon deforestation is clearly soybeans and the appeal they hold for agribusiness," Stephan Schwartzmann, director of the Washington-based group Environmental Defense, said after a visit to the region in July.

A dry season that was unusually parched also appears to have figured in the surge in deforestation from August 2001 to July 2002, according to the country's National Institute for Space Research. So did a certain laxness in law enforcement, traditional during an election year, and a weak currency that made farming for export especially attractive, analysts have suggested.

But experts are unanimous in warning that as soybean farming continues to spread through the adjacent southern Amazon states of Mato Grosso and Pará, the threat to the Amazon ecological system is likely to worsen in the next few years.

Environmental groups had hoped that Brazil's left-wing president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, would take steps to combat deforestation. But Mr. da Silva has instead emphasized increasing agricultural production to swell exports and feed the urban poor, a position that has earned him criticism even from allies.

"The Amazon is not untouchable," Mr. da Silva said during a visit to the region in July. That view is strongly supported by Blairo Maggi, the new governor here in the state of Mato Grosso, who has repeatedly dismissed any concerns about deforestation.

Mr. Maggi, elected last year as the candidate of the Popular Socialist Party, and his family own one of Brazil's largest soy producers, transporters and exporters. The Soybean King, as the Brazilian press is fond of calling him, advocates soybeans as an engine of growth and development in the Amazon.

In fact, Mr. Maggi has called for nearly tripling the area planted with soybeans during the next decade in Mato Grosso,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/17/international/americas/17BRAZ.html?pagewanted=print&position=>

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whose name means dense jungle. His own company, Grupo Maggi, announced early this year that it intended to double the area it has in production.

"To me, a 40 percent increase in deforestation doesn't mean anything at all, and I don't feel the slightest guilt over what we are doing here," Mr. Maggi said in an interview at his office here in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso. "We're talking about an area larger than Europe that has barely been touched, so there is nothing at all to get worried about."

Economists say that the main spur to the soybean boom is the emergence of a middle class in China, much of whose newly disposable income has been spent on a richer, more varied diet. During the past decade, China has been transformed from a net exporter of soybeans to the world's largest importer in some years of whole soybeans as well as oil and meal byproducts.

At the same time, the recent outbreak of mad cow disease in Europe has led to a sharp shift away from using ground-up animal body parts in feed, further increasing demand for soy protein for cattle and pigs.

Initially, the planting was focused in savanna in the area that the Brazilian government defines as Legal Amazonia, but which is not truly forest. But as soy prices rise, producers are pushing northward into the heart of the Amazon, especially along the 1,100-mile highway called BR163, which links this city to the Amazon port of Santarém.

With Mr. da Silva's support, state governments in the Amazon are pushing to complete the paving of highway BR163, which scientists and economists say would accelerate both deforestation and soy cultivation. Mr. Maggi said an agreement had been reached to split the paving costs among private interests and the state and federal governments.

Mr. Maggi rejected the argument advanced by his critics that there is an inherent conflict of interest between his roles as governor and businessman. "It's no secret that I want to build roads and expand agricultural production," he said. "The people voted for that, so I don't see the problem."

The soybean producers who backed Mr. Maggi have been calling for some jungle areas to be reclassified as transitional land or savanna. Brazilian law permits landowners to raze trees and brush and plant crops on 20 percent of their jungle holdings, but that figure rises to 50 percent in transitional areas and 65 percent in savannas.

During the interview, Mr. Maggi argued that the goal of more than doubling soybean production in his state over the next decade could be achieved "if we take full advantage of the deforestation ceiling of 20 percent without going beyond it." But most Brazilian and foreign experts disagree.

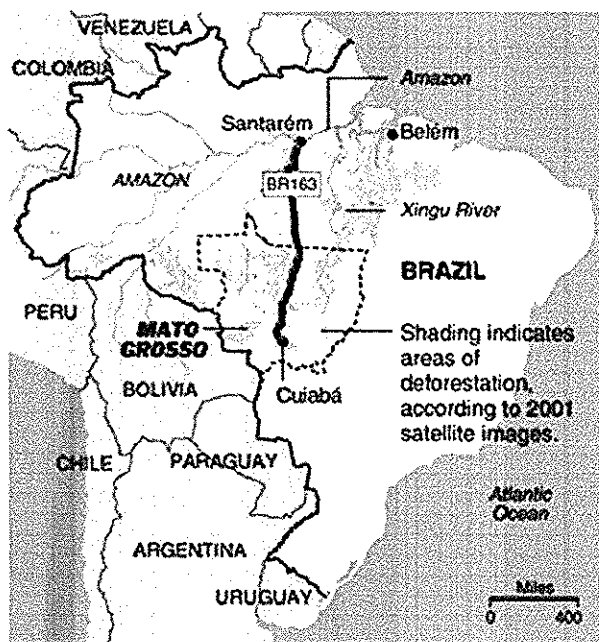
"It would be impossible for them to do that within the law" as currently written, said Dan Nepstad, an American scientist with the Amazon Institute for Environmental Research in Belém. "I suspect that is why they now want to play with the land classification scheme."

Much of last year's deforestation produced clouds of smoke so thick that some airplane flights had to be canceled. But beyond fouling the air with jungle burning, the rapid expansion of soybean production has also contributed to pollution of watersheds that feed into the Amazon, threatening isolated tribes.

Mr. Maggi says any pollution and deforestation problems are largely caused by thousands of poor families from other regions of Brazil that the federal government has settled on homesteads in remote areas of this frontier state.

Recent government research, however, indicates that only 17 percent of deforestation can be attributed to small peasant farmers trying to feed themselves.

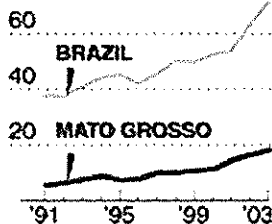
Cultivating a Crop, Clearing the Land



It is estimated that deforestation in the Amazon increased by 40 percent last year. Soybean cultivation is contributing to the problem.

Soybeans Planted

80,000 square miles



Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture; National Institute for Space Research (satellite surveys), Brazil; Institute of Geography and Statistics, Brazil; Mato Grosso State Government