

Roads lead to Amazon 'destruction'

The Amazon forest in Brazil, the world's largest remaining wilderness, could vanish within two decades, a new study reveals.

According to the journal Science, researchers in the United States used computer models to forecast the impact of a development scheme called "Advance Brazil".

Under the scheme, the Brazilian Government expects to spend \$40bn over the next seven years on highways, railways, hydroelectric projects and housing in the Amazon basin.

If the researchers' estimates are correct, barely five percent of the Amazon will survive as pristine forest by 2020. The rest will be destroyed by logging, infrastructure, oil exploration and new towns.

Climate change

More than two million hectares of the Amazon are currently being cleared every year, and even conservative estimates forecast the clearing rate will continue to rise.

The loss of the Amazon could affect the climate, as it plays an important role in soaking up carbon dioxide.

Brazil also has the world's highest diversity of plant and animal species, but if the Amazon disappears, so will much of its biodiversity.

"Unfortunately, there is little government control in the Amazonian frontier," said William Laurance of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.

"Illegal logging and land-clearing are rampant. New roads that cut into the frontier almost always initiate a process of spontaneous colonization, logging, hunting and land speculation that is almost impossible to stop.

"The only way to control these processes is to control where the roads are located."

Carbon sales

One of the researchers, Scott Bergen of Oregon State University, says it is not too late to preserve at least some of the world's greatest tropical rainforest, at the same time as pursuing economic development in Brazil.

But, he says, there is an urgent need for a fresh approach.

This might include the selling of carbon credits, a practice which allows countries to achieve their pollution reduction targets by buying the unused emissions quotas of other nations.

This could net the Brazilian Government up to \$2bn dollars a year, which it could use in alternative development programmes that had less of an impact on the Amazon forest.

"We've heard a lot about ecotourism, sustainable forestry and other conservation efforts in the Amazon," Bergen said.

"But if these development plans go through, we'll lose the largest remaining wilderness on Earth and a huge amount of the world's remaining biodiversity.

"And that, of course, doesn't even consider the enormous impacts on the carbon cycle, global climate and greenhouse warming."

Some researchers have sought to challenge the importance placed on the tropical rainforests by environmentalists.

They point out that these forests did not exist even on the scale they do today just 15,000 years ago, when grasslands were probably the dominant ecosystems.

The dissenters say the obsession with saving the Amazon forest represents an scientifically unjustified Northern agenda that would have the effect of denying indigenous peoples economic growth and prosperity.