

INDIAN LAW RESOURCE CENTER

CENTRO DE RECURSOS JURÍDICOS PARA LOS PUEBLOS INDÍGENAS

MAIN OFFICE * 602 North Ewing Street, Helena, Montana 59601 * (406) 449-2006 * mt@indianlaw.org
WASHINGTON OFFICE * 601 E Street, S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003 * (202) 547-2800 * dcoffice@indianlaw.org



The Brazilian Amazon Rainforest

The Brazilian Amazon rainforest is one of the world's richest regions. The forest has an extension of 4.1 million square kilometers; of which 1,082,111.4 belongs to 430 collectively-held indigenous lands, corresponding to 110 million hectares and equivalent to 60% of Brazil's indigenous population. The Amazon is largest rainforest on the planet and is home to an indigenous population of approximately 440,000 peoples, representing 160 languages and 180 indigenous tribes, of whom 66 live freely and autonomously without contact with the surrounding society.

The entire Amazon rainforest in South America extends throughout the territory belonging to six South American countries, including Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. Nearly 69% of the Amazon rainforest is found in Brazil, covering the states of Pará, Amazonas, Maranhão, Goiás, Mato Grosso, Acre, Amapá, Rondônia and Roraima.

The forest is home to 2,500 tree species (one third of the planet's tropical timber) and 30,000 of the 100,000 plant species that exist throughout Latin America. More than a forest, the Amazon is also a world of water where the waterways communicate and are seasonally affected by tidal flows. The Amazon River basin - the largest river basin in the world with 1,100 tributaries - covers an approximate length of 6 million square kilometers. Its main river, the Amazon, crosses the region to flow into the Atlantic Ocean, sending about 1.75 million liters of water into the sea every second.

The Amazon is, in fact, a vast region rich in natural resources; it has large reserves of wood, rubber, nuts, fish, minerals and others coupled with a low population density (2 inhabitants per km²) and increasing urbanization. Its cultural richness includes traditional knowledge of how to use and exploit these resources without depleting or destroying the natural habitat. However, the region has very low socioeconomic indices due to geographic obstacles and the lack of infrastructure and technology, which increases the cost of exploration.

The Amazon has been inhabited since time immemorial. It is estimated that a few million indigenous people lived in the Amazon at the arrival of the European colonizers. The modern occupation of the Amazon began around 1540; however, human presence implied almost no change to the natural habitat. The end of World War II ushered in a new period, especially in Brazil, aimed at agricultural development and settling new frontiers.

In the last decades, there has been an increase in deforestation and controlled burns, the conversion of land for agriculture purposes, establishing settlements in preserved areas, and large-

scale hydroelectric dams and infrastructure projects, all of which have had adverse effects on the Amazon Region. A report by the Secretary of Strategic Affairs, which is linked to the Presidency of the Republic, acknowledges that 80% of economic production in the Amazon Region is based on illegal activities. There are about 22 foreign logging companies operating in the region with little to no control over what is being produced or what areas are being explored. The material waste from these companies, which is between 60% and 70%, further aggravates the situation.

In addition, the government's policy of encouraging large-scale infrastructure projects in the Amazon will only increase environmental degradation and harm the region's inhabitants. The flooding caused by hydroelectric dams has been another form of forest destruction. This is the case, for example, of the Balbina Plant to the north of Manaus, Brasilia. The causal relationship between the flooded area and the hydroelectric power plant has become a worldwide example of economic and ecological unfeasibility. Mining activity has also had serious environmental consequences, such as soil erosion and mercury contamination in rivers. All of these changes in the Amazon Region can and do have climatic, ecological and environmental implications for the region, the continent and the world.

Although Brazil has some of the world's most progressive environmental legislation, it is not enough to prevent forest devastation. The most serious problems include the lack of dedicated inspection personnel, the difficulties in monitoring large, inaccessible areas and the poor management of protected areas, bolstered by President Bolsonaro's current position. The current Brazilian Government has not given the necessary attention to the Amazon; rather it is subordinate to agribusiness interests, ignores the information generated by its own institutions and frames socio-environmental issues in terms of political ideology. More than 12% of the Amazon rainforest has already been destroyed due to inadequate government policies, unsuitable land use models, and economic pressures, which has led to the unsustainable use of natural resources. According to official estimates, by 2020 the Amazon will have lost 25% of its native coverage. Solving this situation depends on how political, economic, social and environmental factors are articulated.

In recent weeks, the eyes of the world have turned to the Brazilian Amazon in the face of the fires destroying the homes of thousands of indigenous people, but also the rainforest as the guardian of a unique biodiversity. Data from Brazil's Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA) shows that at least 148 indigenous lands in the Brazilian Amazon were affected by the fires. According to satellite images, there were 3,553 hot spots in the Amazon rainforest on August 20th. Between July 20th and August 20th, there were 33,060 hot spots in the Brazilian Amazon according to data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE). The ten indigenous lands most affected by the fires detected by ISA include the Araguaia Indigenous Park (TO), TI Pimentel Barbosa (MT), TI Parabubure (MT), TI Apyterewa (PA), TI Marãiwatsédé (MT), TI Kayapó (PA), TI Areões (MT), TI Kanela (MA), TI Mundurucu (PA) and TI Pareci (MT). In Araguaia Indigenous Park, the most affected indigenous lands, there were 752 hot spots within a month. In addition, the states of the Amazon most affected by fire during this period were: Pará with 8,622 hot spots, Amazonas (6,654), Mato Grosso (6,147) and Rondônia (5,044).