

# Smithsonian Fragmentation Project threatened by Amazon Colonization Plan

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The Biological Dynamics of Forest Fragments Project, one of the most important long-term research efforts in the Amazon, is imperiled by new colonization proposed by the Brazilian federal agency SUFRAMA, according to a commentary in the July 26, 2007 journal *Nature*, co-authored by William Laurance of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama and Regina Luizão of Brazil's National Institute for Amazonian Research.

Hunters have already invaded the area. Research camps have been raided and equipment has been stolen. Last year, several study sites were burned by colonists. "The stakes are very high," said Laurance. "It's not just the fragmentation project that's threatened but also other scientific sites operated by Brazilian and other organizations, as well as critical conservation areas in the region."

Since 1979, the project has hosted hundreds of scientists and students from around the world, working to understand how habitat fragmentation affects the complex Amazonian rainforest. Located two hours north of Manaus, Brazil, the project's study area spans 1,000 square kilometers and is home to an abundance of large rainforest animals, such as jaguars, pumas, tapirs and harpy eagles, which are quickly hunted out of unprotected forests.

Now, SUFRAMA (Superintendencia da Zona Franca de Manaus, the Manaus duty free zone oversight commission), which manages a large expanse of central Amazonia, plans to establish colonization projects

both inside the study area and across the region. Altogether, many thousands of people could be settled in what is now rainforest.

“There is really not much to be gained economically from these colonization projects, and there is so much to lose,” said Thomas Lovejoy, President of the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment in Washington, D.C., who conceived and helped to establish the fragmentation project more than 25 years ago. “In fact, the results of the science we’re doing could be more profitable for Brazil. Intact forests could have great economic value in the long term for the purpose of stabilizing global climate and for conserving biodiversity.”

The scientists emphasize that such Brazilian agencies as the Ministry for the Environment and IBAMA, the national environmental agency, have been helpful and sympathetic; but they have struggled to get the attention of SUFRAMA, despite years of behind-the-scenes negotiations.

“We appreciate that SUFRAMA is mainly concerned with economic development,” said Laurance, “but the economic benefit of the colonization projects is very low. The forest is just being burned to make charcoal or low-quality cattle pasture. And it’s a notoriously hard life for the colonists, who struggle to eke out a living in an area with many diseases but far from any medical services.”

Luizão agrees. “We are hoping that SUFRAMA can partner with us to help promote a real vision for sustainable development in the central Amazon. We believe that economic progress can proceed without causing irreversible harm to science and the environment. Our goal is not to confront SUFRAMA, but we are desperate. This is a cry for help.”

Source: Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute

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