

Amazon Rainforest at risk from initiative to connect South American economies

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An unprecedented development plan to link South America's economies through new transportation, energy and telecommunications projects could destroy much of the Amazon rainforest in coming decades, according to a new study by Conservation International (CI) scientist Tim Killeen.

However, Killeen reports that such a disastrous outcome can be avoided if steps are taken now to reconcile the legitimate desires for development with the globally important need to conserve the Amazon ecosystem.

His 98-page report, titled "A Perfect Storm in the Amazon Wilderness: Development and Conservation in the Context of the Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA)," offers pragmatic approaches for resolving the enduring paradox between economic development and environmental protection.

Killeen, who has worked in the Amazon region for 25 years, fully supports the 12-nation IIRSA plan that seeks the historic goal of overcoming the geographic obstacles of the Amazon wilderness to connect the area's isolated economies. IIRSA investments will integrate improved highway networks, river ways, hydroelectric dams and telecommunications links throughout the continent – particularly in remote, isolated regions – to allow greater trade and create a South American community of nations.

Killeen's analysis shows that IIRSA's development projects will coincide with mounting pressures on the Amazon's ecosystem and its traditional communities. These pressures include climate change; logging; deforestation for agriculture; and mineral exploitation, as well as the impending boom in biofuel crops such as sugar cane.

“Failure to foresee the full impact of IIRSA investments, particularly in the context of climate change and global markets, could lead to a perfect storm of environmental destruction,” Killeen says. “At stake are the greatest tropical wilderness area on the planet and the multiple benefits it provides.”

The study offers three possible scenarios for the future of the Amazon region, and warns that infrastructure projects that are developed without timely or thorough environmental impact analysis will lead to the worst-case scenario -- widespread deforestation and the eventual loss of the Amazon jungle within three or four decades.

“Our hope is that this document will stimulate IIRSA to become an even more important and relevant initiative, one that incorporates the vision of an ecologically and culturally intact Amazon,” writes Gustavo Fonseca, the Global Environment Facility's team leader for natural resources, in the publication's preface. “South America has an enormous economic incentive to conserve the ecosystem services provided by the Amazon, along with achieving real and effective regional integration. These are not mutually exclusive goals.”

According to Killeen, the destruction of the Amazon as a result of currently-planned IIRSA projects would have profound and far-reaching consequences. The Amazon River basin is the world's largest reserve of fresh water, while the extensive Amazon wilderness regulates the continental climate, spawning annual precipitation that waters the multibillion-dollar agriculture industry of the Rio Plata basin to the

south. Cutting and burning of the Amazon forests could seriously jeopardize this industry as well as destroy the vast ecosystems that are home to indigenous people. It would also wipe out some of Earth's richest storehouses of terrestrial and freshwater life and would exacerbate global warming by releasing into the atmosphere the huge quantities of carbon stored in the biomass of the tropical forest – estimated at about twenty times the world's total annual greenhouse gas emissions.

Killeen argues it doesn't have to be this way. He notes that intact Amazon forest could generate billions of dollars in carbon credits under a market system being negotiated to succeed the Kyoto Protocol. Biofuel crops, such as sugarcane could be planted on the 65 million hectares (162 million acres) of already deforested land, rather than clearing more jungle to establish new plantations. He also advocates other environmentally friendly solutions, such as fish farming, which could use the Amazon's abundant water resources to create economic opportunity for peasant farmers and produce millions of dollars in revenue.

“A visionary initiative such as IIRSA should be visionary in all of its dimensions, and should incorporate measures to ensure that the region's renewable natural resources are conserved and its traditional communities strengthened,” Killeen writes.

Source: Conservation International

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