

Scientists warn Brazil's environmental leadership at risk

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Scientists convening at the largest-ever meeting of tropical biologists congratulated Brazil for its global leadership on environment and science, but warned that recent developments could jeopardize that position, undermining progress on reducing deforestation, protecting indigenous lands, and safeguarding ecosystems outside the Amazon rainforest.

Forgoing the Rio+20 Earth Summit, some 1200 tropical biologists and conservationists met in Bonito, Brazil at the 49th annual meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC) to present and discuss topics ranging from ecology to sustainable use of tropical biology. More than half the participants were Brazilian.

At the conclusion of the meetings, ATBC issued a declaration urging the Brazil government maintain its leadership position on environmental conservation and sustainable development, by continuing to utilize scientific input and invest in science and education.

"Brazil's success in advancing science and conservation, while achieving impressive economic growth and significant improvements in [human welfare](#) are being watched by the world as a potential model for environmentally sustainable development," said John Kress, a botanist at the Smithsonian Institution who serves as ATBC Executive Director. "But recent developments raise concerns."

"Brazil was on a good track on environmental issues over past 10-20

years," said Carlos Fonseca, a botanist at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte. "We saw real changes in how society perceives and values the environment. Recently this changed drastically mostly due to Congress, which is changing the laws to go against popular opinion and the advice of scientists. This is threatening a lot of the achievements we've had in the past two decades."

The declaration cited several issues including the recent push to weaken the country's Forest Code, which stipulates how much forest a landowner must preserve on their property, and proposed [infrastructure projects](#), which could worsen deforestation and degrade important ecosystem functions.

"Changes to the Forest Code are short-sighted and largely ignored input from biologists and conservation scientists," said Fonseca. "The new Forest Code could reverse Brazil's progress in reducing deforestation."

The scientists also noted possible changes in how indigenous lands and protected areas are designated. The proposal would give more power to Brazilian Congress, which passed the revised forest code, and industrial development agencies in determining what lands are set aside as indigenous territories and parks.

"We are concerned about a push in Congress to start reviewing the tenure of the [indigenous lands](#), which is something that is unique to Brazil," said José Manuel Fragoso, an ecologist at Stanford University. "Indigenous peoples depend on these lands for their livelihoods and are also very important partners for biodiversity conservation."

"We feel that Brazil has been in a leadership position with regard to the environment so we're disappointed to see the government failing to address concerns raised by the scientific community on some of these large-scale industrial development projects like the Belo Monte dam and

the proposed project on the Tapajós River," said Fragoso.

"Brazil is planning 30 new dams in the legal Amazon region by 2020," said Philip Fearnside of the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia in Manaus, Brazil. "These dams will block key fish migration routes, flood tens of thousands of hectares of rainforest, inundate indigenous communities, and unleash vast amounts of methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Amazon dams are not a source of clean energy."

The declaration urged the government rigorously and transparently consider and utilize scientific information in the planning all dam projects. It noted the need to investigate less damaging forms of technology to meet growing energy needs.

ATBC further highlighted Brazil's lesser-known, but highly important ecosystems, which in some cases haven't experienced the progress seen in the Amazon. The deforestation rate in the Brazilian Amazon has fallen by nearly 80 percent since 2004.

"Brazil must be commended for the drop in Amazon deforestation," said Kirsten Silvius of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. "But other important ecosystems -- the Atlantic forest, cerrado, caatinga, pantanal, and pampas grasslands -- have not received the same level of attention. Indeed, the cerrado is being converted at a more than twice the rate of the Amazon and is at extreme risk from synergistic interactions between fragmentation, climate change and fire."

"The world is still losing forests at a rapid pace, which as a tropical biologist, is a huge concern to me," said Susan Laurance. "Brazil can offer a positive model for other tropical countries but also for its other ecosystems."

The declaration notes Brazil has shown both vision and leadership in

investing in higher education and research, and now boasts world-class institutes and scientists in many areas of scientific endeavor. Its development of satellite technology for monitoring the Amazon has been central to setting and meeting of targets for reducing deforestation.

"We urge that the same vision is extended to other ecosystems to ensure long-term environmentally sustainable stewardship," stated the declaration. "New mechanisms are needed to ensure that vital scientific information is incorporated into decision-making processes from the start."

"Brazil has the once in a lifetime opportunity to lead the world on the environment. It has a wealth of scientific capacity and resources available to develop evidence-based policy," said Toby Gardner. "It shouldn't pass up this opportunity."

Provided by Stanford University

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