

Jair Bolsonaro can be stopped from trashing the Amazon – here's how

January 7 2019, by Anthony Pereira



Recent (June 2017 – May 2018) deforestation in the state of Pará, Brazil. Purple areas are newly exposed soil. Credit: [INPE, CC BY-SA](#)

The inauguration of Brazil's new president, Jair Bolsonaro, has triggered fears that rates of deforestation in the Amazon will increase. There are indeed good reasons for concern about Bolsonaro's administration. But several factors, both domestic and transnational, could constrain its ability to wreak environmental damage.

First, some bad news: Bolsonaro and his cabinet do seem to view [environmental concerns](#) as an obstacle to development. For instance, the new environment minister, Ricardo Salles, said that the debate over [climate change](#) was a "secondary issue" and was recently convicted in court of [fraudulently favouring mining companies](#) when he was state secretary for the environment in São Paulo. Under Salles' leadership, the ministry will probably suffer budget cuts, and it has already [lost key departments](#).

Furthermore, Bolsonaro has said he wants to restrict the ability of IBAMA, the forest protection agency, to fine individuals and companies that [illegally deforest and pollute](#). And, while the rate of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon fell overall by [roughly 75%](#) between 2004 and 2017, it has gone back up again even before Bolsonaro took office. Between August 2017 and July 2018, deforestation increased by an estimated [13.7%](#).

Bolsonaro also recently [tweeted](#) that he wants to free Brazilian agribusiness from dependence on imported fertiliser (75% comes from abroad). However, mining the ingredients in Brazil could do further [environmental damage](#). For example, the largest recently discovered [deposit of potassium](#), used to make fertiliser, is on the banks of the River Madeira in the Amazon.

The new president also appears to favour more dam-building (there are proposals to build [334 dams](#) in the Amazon). He also backed away from the previous commitment of the Brazilian government to host the next UN climate conference later this year. And, on his first day in office, Bolsonaro signed a provisional measure transferring authority to demarcate indigenous lands from the justice ministry [to the agriculture ministry](#), thereby making it highly likely that – as he promised – no new indigenous reserves will be created on his watch.

Brazil's environmental movement

Bolsonaro does face some constraints. The new president speaks as if agribusiness and the protection of the environment are incompatible – and appears to want to sacrifice the environment for farming, mining and logging. But other voices will have a say, and at least some heed will be given to the view that sustainable agriculture which preserves biodiversity is better both for Brazil's development prospects and for the world's climate.

Before his inauguration, Bolsonaro said that he wanted to subordinate the environment ministry to the agriculture ministry. He was persuaded to drop this idea, due in part to criticisms from [environmental NGOs](#) and [federal civil servants](#) in environmental agencies. Some agricultural interests even spoke out, because they fear that their international image and access to markets, especially the European Union, could be damaged by being [associated with deforestation](#).

Brazil also has an environmental movement that is as old as its counterparts in Europe and North America. It was the strength of this movement that ensured the country's 1988 constitution has several [ecological safeguards](#) in place, including conservation areas, indigenous reserves and the environmental licensing system. José Lutzenberger, an [environmental pioneer](#) and former environment minister, helped to organise the Eco 92 conference in Rio and demarcate the huge Yanomami indigenous reserve.

The Rio conference was part of a process that eventually led to the 2015 Paris Agreement, where Brazilian participation was important. And, in his last days in office, outgoing president Michel Temer delivered a report to his successor that recommended that Brazil stay in the Paris Agreement and pursue the goal of achieving a [zero-carbon economy](#) by 2060.

Pressure from overseas

External actors can also pressure the Bolsonaro administration. For example, the government of Norway has contributed 93% of the money disbursed by the Amazon Fund to 102 different projects, amounting to [hundreds of millions of dollars](#). These funds provide incentives to enforce environmental laws and create sustainable livelihoods in the rainforest.

Norway's contributions are tied to maintaining rates of deforestation to specified limits, a fact Temer was [reminded of by his hosts](#) on a visit to Oslo in June 2017.

Pay attention to facts on the ground

The Bolsonaro administration is likely to move quietly to achieve some of its objectives. In addition to weakening the environment ministry it could informally signal to state governors and congressional delegations that the laws regarding deforestation will no longer be rigorously enforced. Observers therefore have to be attentive to facts on the ground. Civil society organisations and journalists in the Amazon working for publications such as [InfoAmazonia](#) and [O Eco](#) are particularly good sources of information. There is some transnational support for these journalists. For example, the Pulitzer Centre is administering a [Rainforest Journalism Fund](#), financed by the Norwegian government, which gives grants to journalists reporting on deforestation.

Brazil's foreign minister Ernesto Araújo [claims](#) that initiatives such as the 2015 Paris Agreement are liberal, "globalist" and part of a gigantic "cultural Marxist" propaganda machine. From this perspective, international NGOs and foreign states are violating Brazilian sovereignty by interfering in the Amazon.

But this is a smokescreen. In the Paris Agreement the Brazilian government voluntarily committed to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 37% by 2025 and 43% by 2030, with 2005 as the baseline year. The [Brazilian Climate Change Forum](#) that produced this commitment had input from 340 different government entities, businesses, NGOs, and academics. And the country already has various advantages when it comes to making the transition to a low-carbon economy, including relatively clean energy and 60m hectares of degraded pasture land that [could be reforested](#).

Preserving the Amazon rainforest is of fundamental importance to the planet, and there are many people in Brazil who want to do that. They reject the notion that development and environmental protection are mutually exclusive, and support reorienting the Amazonian economy towards sustainable livelihoods. It remains to be seen whether their vision will prevail in the years to come.

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