

# Brazil's Amazon: Deforestation 'surges to 12-year high'

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Scientists say the Amazon has suffered losses at an accelerated rate since Jair Bolsonaro took office

**Deforestation of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil has surged to its highest level since 2008, the country's space agency (Inpe) reports.**

The rainforest lost 11,088km<sup>2</sup> of its vegetation between August 2019 and July 2020, marking an increase of 9.5% from previous 12 months, Inpe's data shows.

Scientists say the Amazon has suffered losses at an accelerated rate since Jair Bolsonaro took office in 2019.

The Amazon is a vital carbon store that slows down the pace of global warming.

Since taking office nearly two years ago, Mr Bolsonaro has encouraged the expansion of agricultural and mining activities in the world's largest rainforest.

The figures released by Inpe are preliminary, with the official statistics set to be released early next year.

Vice-President Hamilton Mourão was present for the announcement on Monday.

Mr Bolsonaro has previously clashed with Inpe over its deforestation data. Last year, he accused the agency of smearing Brazil's reputation.

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The scale of destruction in the Amazon rainforest is hard to comprehend.

Last year I experienced the silent aftermath of deforestation where huge trees had been bulldozed and would later be burned.

This is done to create fields for cattle grazing and soya cultivation - big earners for Brazil.

At the time it was said that an area of forest the size of a football pitch was cleared every single minute.

But soon that calculation was overtaken, and this year has seen the largest fires for a decade.

None of this should be a surprise: the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, was elected on a promise of development.

Keen to promote mining as well as agriculture, he described the Amazon as "a periodic table" of valuable minerals, and he resents what he sees as outside interference.

But climate scientists say the billions of trees are a vast store of carbon and, without them, the rise in global temperatures will accelerate.

# Amazon deforestation surges to 12-year high under Bolsonaro

An area seven times larger than Greater London has been lost in what one activist called a ‘humiliating and shameful’ destruction



More than 11,000 sq km of rainforest was destroyed in Brazil between between August 2019 and July 2020, official figures show. Photograph: Christian Braga/Greenpeace

## **Tom Phillips** *in Rio de Janeiro*

Mon 30 Nov 2020 23.43 GMT

A vast expanse of **Amazon rainforest** seven times larger than Greater London was destroyed over the last year as deforestation surged to a 12-year high under Brazil’s far-right president Jair Bolsonaro.

Figures released by the Brazilian space institute, Inpe, on Monday showed at least 11,088 sq km of rainforest was razed between August 2019 and July this year – the highest figure since 2008.

Carlos Rittl, a Brazilian environmentalist who works at Germany’s Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, said the numbers were “humiliating, shameful

and outrageous” – and a clear sign of the damage being done to the environment since Bolsonaro took office in January 2019.

“This is an area a third the size of Belgium – gigantic areas of forest that are being lost simply because under Bolsonaro those who are doing the destroying feel no fear of being punished,” Rittl said.

“Bolsonaro’s great achievement when it comes to the environment has been this tragic destruction of forests which has turned Brazil into perhaps one of the greatest enemies of the global environment and into an international pariah too.”

Brazil’s vice-president, Hamilton Mourão, tried to put a positive spin on the bleak figures as he visited Inpe’s headquarters in the city of São José dos Campos on Monday. Mourão claimed the annual increase of 9.5% was less than half the anticipated figure of about 20%.

“We’re not here to commemorate any of this, because it’s nothing to commemorate. But it means that the efforts being launched [against Amazon deforestation] are starting to yield fruit,” Mourão claimed.

Environmentalists, who blame Bolsonaro’s deliberate weakening of enforcement efforts for the rise, scoffed at that reading. “This number is an outrage – it doesn’t tell us anything positive about the Bolsonaro administration at all. On the contrary, it shows that despite the [Covid-19] quarantine, environmental crime has increased,” Rittl said.

Mourão’s comment about the smaller-than-expected rise was “like saying that we were expecting 300,000 Covid deaths and we ‘only’ had 200,000,” Rittl added.

Cristiane Mazzetti, a Greenpeace spokesperson for the Amazon, said: “This is an even worse number than 2019 and a direct reflection of the Bolsonaro administration’s anti-environmental policies which have weakened the monitoring agencies and used misguided strategies to fight deforestation, such as deploying the armed forces rather than environmental protection agents.”

“These numbers show us that we are continuing to move in the wrong direction than the one needed to deal with the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis.”

The Observatório do Clima group said soaring destruction came as no surprise to those “following the dismantling of environmental policy that has been underway in Brazil since January 2019”.

“The numbers simply show that Jair Bolsonaro’s plan has worked. They are the result of a successful project to annihilate the ability of the Brazilian state and its monitoring agencies to care for our forests and fight crime in the Amazon,” it said in a statement.

Mourão said the figures, which were produced with information from the Prodes satellite system, showed most of the devastation was occurring in four regions: Pará state, the north of Mato Grosso state, the south of Amazonas state and Rondônia.

Pará, a longtime deforestation hotspot, was by far the worst-affected state accounting for almost 47% of the total deforestation.

“Thanks to Inpe’s work we now have a perfect sense of where we need to focus our actions in order to prevent illegal activities occurring,” Mourão told reporters, praising its “brilliant scientists” for their efforts.

But despite a growing “green” government propaganda campaign – which recently saw Mourão take foreign ambassadors on **a tour of the Amazon region** – environmentalists and foreign investors are skeptical about its efforts to protect the world’s biggest rainforest.

During that three-day excursion ambassadors were not taken to any of the deforestation hotspots which Mourão detailed on Monday – and activists dismissed the visit as a “sham”.

In May thousands of Brazilian troops were sent to the Amazon supposedly to fight environmental crime, although **some believe they are merely making things worse**.

Rittl said one ray of light was the recent defeat of Bolsonaro's key international ally, Donald Trump. "Without the backing of Trump in the US, the international pressure [on Bolsonaro over the environment] will increase and it will increase a lot," he predicted.

Bolsonaro is one of only a tiny group of world leaders who has yet to recognise Joe Biden's victory and on Sunday **claimed**, without proof, that unnamed "sources" had convinced him the US election had been plagued with fraud.

## 'The Amazon is the entry door of the world': why Brazil's biodiversity crisis affects us all

Indigenous leader Célia Xakriabá and Vagina Monologues author V discuss the destruction of Brazil's forests and why this is the century of the indigenous woman

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*V (formerly Eve Ensler)*

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- 'The Brazilian government is committing genocide', says indigenous leader Célia Xakriabá – video

# C

élia Xakriabá is the voice of a new generation of female indigenous leaders who are leading the fight against the destruction of Brazil's forests both in the Amazon and the lesser known **Cerrado**, a savannah that covers a fifth of the country. V, formerly Eve Ensler, is the award-winning author of the *Vagina Monologues*, an activist and founder of **V-Day**, a global movement to end violence against all women and girls and the Earth. The two recently held a conversation in which V asked Xakriabá about what is happening to Brazil's biodiversity and indigenous peoples, and why women are the key to change.

**V: Many people, especially in the west, don't really understand what's happening to the Cerrado in Brazil. Can you tell us what's happening to the forests?**

C: It's very tough at this moment. Every minute one person dies of Covid-19, but also every minute one tree is cut. And whenever a tree is cut, a part of us is cut, a part of us also dies, because the territory dies and with no territory there is no air, no good air for everyone in the world. People can't breathe. So all this Covid contamination, it gets to the territory through the miners, **the gold miners**, the loggers and the rangers. And now that we are getting to August, we get even more worried about **the fires, all the fires that burned the Amazon last year**. It's going to come back.

**And what happens to all the animals, and to the birds and to every living thing in the forest? What happens to them?**

When the forest is burned, the birds and the animals, they are either burned or they go away. And this doesn't affect only the animals, but it also affects us. We rely on them to eat. So with no animals, we have to rely on food from the outside, and this ends up making our children and our women sick, here with the Xakriabá people. I can hear the song of the birds now, but it's also a song of misery, of sadness, because most of them, they are alone. They have lost their partners. The birds, they usually sing as a couple. And many of them are now

singing alone. And we, the indigenous are becoming more alone, because they're taking people from us.



The Brazilian tribe leader Célia Xakriabá, November 2019. Photograph: Thomas Samson/AFP via Getty Images

**When I first met you, we laughed because we were talking about vaginas and you told me that the Amazon was the vagina of the world. So can you talk a little bit about that?**

The Amazon's like the vagina of the world because it's where people come from. It's like the entry door of the world. When this opening is sick, the future generations, they will be sick also. People lost this connection to the Earth because they don't see Earth and land as a relative. For me, the Earth is like a grandmother, because it's Earth who gave birth to all of the mothers of the world. Earth is like the first independent woman that created humanity and Earth needed rivers and water to create humanity. But now people just see Earth as a thing. They can design big cities, but they can't see this connection to Earth. They go to the supermarket, to the grocery store, and they don't know where that food comes from.

**It's so powerful to see how many indigenous women are leading the struggle to defend the forests and the land. Why do you think this is important?**



I've been saying that this 21st century, it's the century of the indigenous woman, because you can't cure with the same evil that first caused the sickness. You have to overcome this colonising power that is mainly male. I like to say about the matrix of destruction that it's not matrix, it's the *patrix* because it's based on patriarchy, not matriarchy. And the women, they are the ones who are in this century regaining power over the land, because they know how to cure the Earth. Women have this knowledge and that's why we are on the frontline right now. I am fighting to not only strengthen the role of women in the territory and in the fight, but also in politics, with indigenous women running for positions in parliament, in the Brazilian Congress. Who can take better care of humanity, if not women?

### **People just see Earth as a thing. They can design big cities, but they can't see this connection to Earth**

**Can you talk a little bit about how patriarchy has disconnected us from the land and the connection of patriarchy and capitalism?**

When **Pedro Álvares Cabral** first invaded Brazil in the 1500s, the first thing that got his attention was the wood from the **pau-brasil**, which is where the name Brazil comes from. In 1511, this guy named **Fernando de Noronha** exported 5,000 pau-brasil to Europe. So that's when it all began. Since then, they don't respect the relation of the indigenous peoples with time. That's why capitalism sees indigenous peoples as a threat. You have to take everything you can in as little time as possible, but that's not how indigenous people relate to time and to labour. Yeah, the indigenous people weren't keeping up with the "progress" of humanity but it's not that we are late, it's because they're killing us. In the last year there was more than a million hectares of destruction in all the six biomes of Brazil. Since the 1500s, until now, no Earth, no land, no mother, no woman can support this kind of destruction.



A fire in the Cerrado, October 2018. The area is one of the world's oldest and most diverse tropical ecosystems.  
Photograph: David Bebbler/WWF-UK/PA

**Can you tell me what is the lived experience of the struggle for life and the struggle of the indigenous peoples in this phase of the onslaught of the extractive industries, and now with Covid exacerbating the situation? What is happening?**

During this pandemic we are making this effort to remain in our territories, in our houses, in our homes, but also at the same time, we have to challenge, to fight, because very far away in Brazil, in the Congress, they are negotiating our territories, our homes and our houses. During the pandemic, **hundreds of indigenous people have died**. But we have to think about how many people would die if we don't fight. You have to think about the pandemic that is killing us, about the racism that is killing us, about the macro politics, about the colonisation, the absence of the state. It's hard to tell which weapon is more dangerous, because we are getting killed by many different weapons.

**It appears very clear that President Jair Bolsonaro has weaponised Covid against indigenous peoples. Can you talk a little bit about this?**

Indigenous peoples in Brazil, they are 1% of the general population, but they're **almost 9% of the victims of Covid-19**. When people say that Covid-19 doesn't choose class or race or gender, it's kind of a lie, because the state, they

choose who will die. The government, it can justify all of this, saying that it's just a disease, it's a fatality. When an elder, when an important leader of indigenous peoples dies, a part of us also dies with them. It's like the ancestors and the elders, they're the hands that hold the rattles when you're singing. It doesn't matter if I stay alive, a part of me, or some parts of me have died in this pandemic.



Brazilian indigenous women march in Brasilia on 13 August 2019, to denounce the 'genocidal' policies of President Jair Bolsonaro. Photograph: Evaristo Sa/AFP/Getty Images

**I love the campaign [#CuraDaTerra](#) [Cure of the Earth], because it expresses this idea of indigenous peoples as the cure, the antidote, the growth space past capitalism through living in symbiosis with nature, indigenous stewardship of land, traditional indigenous environmental knowledge. How is this being received in Brazil?**

One thing that is very important is we pay attention to these things like reconnection, retaking, re-enchantment, because that's one thing that indigenous people do to hope for a better world. It's not the chemicals or the active principles generated in laboratories around the world that are going to cure the Earth. What is going to cure the Earth is our capacity, our ability to reactivate our connection to the Earth, to reactivate our culture and to reactivate the power of our ancestors. We have this culture deep inside us, and you can't change that. We can't cure evil without curing the Earth, because the

Earth is bleeding. It's full of scars because of its children. And if you don't listen to the Earth, we will all die. Some people may not die directly in territory conflicts, but they will die, because they won't have anything left to breathe. All they will have left is poison.

**Like in the US, Brazil is going through a kind of dark night of the soul with Bolsonaro in power.**

Bolsonaro likes to say that **indigenous peoples are becoming more human**, but the indigenous peoples don't like the kind of humanity that doesn't respect the Earth, doesn't respect the animals, because you can only know how to be a human if you know how to be a plant, how to be a seed, how to be food. And so actually this project, it's an anti-humanitarian project of the government. It represents a sick lung, a sick organ of the body of the Earth.



An indigenous woman looks at dead fish near the Paraopeba river in the Cerrado. Photograph: Adriano Machado/Reuters

**And why do you think at this moment that we have so many leaders in the world like Trump or Duterte or Modi or Putin or Bolsonaro?**

All of this is because we are living in a moment of disputes, disputes of values. They are not part of this project of regaining and retaking the values of life. They are like boils on your skin, and they emerge with all the fury, these boils,

like a cancer to these values of life. They emerge with this fury because they appear to have the desire to extinguish all diversity – the diversity of life, the diversity of culture, the diversity of seeds, the diversity of territory.

**[Leaders like Bolsonaro] emerge with this fury because they appear to have the desire to extinguish all ... the diversity of life**

**What is the mood and the feeling in Brazil right now?**

Some people who thought we were invisible, they didn't look, didn't pay attention to the indigenous populations, now they're starting to pay attention to us. And the indigenous people, they have within themselves the sense of solidarity and of connection that other peoples don't have. And that's something that can help heal the Earth and heal our world because humanity, without love, it's a dead humanity.

**And how do you stay grounded in the midst of all these changes happening in the Cerrado and then the planet at large?**

The fight is what feeds me. So every time I think about taking a step away from the fight, I can't. And as an indigenous person, you fight to survive. You don't really have another choice. I think about the fight as the children that I haven't generated yet, the children that I and the indigenous peoples will give birth to in the future. I remember that some time ago in another genocidal process that was going on, the leaders and the indigenous peoples weren't allowed to paint themselves. So the women would keep these painting pots in their houses. It was a way of not forgetting the paintings and the patterns. And now when I think about that, I think about my body as a pot. I like to paint myself because it's a way of getting all this memory eternalised, and not forgetting, because more than fighting, painting myself is a way of continuing what my ancestors were doing. Some feel pretty when they put on their best dress. I feel pretty when I paint myself. And it's not only that. When I paint myself, I feed my spirit and I keep my mind strong. And my headdress gives power to my thoughts and to my fight. So, when I paint myself, when I put my headdress on, I'm not only doing that to show others, I'm doing that to keep myself, my mind and my spirit strong and fed, to keep singing.



A Kayapo indigenous woman paints her daughter with a traditional drawing. Photograph: Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

**What can allies in the global north do to be in solidarity with you, your community, and the affected communities of Brazil?**

People can fight along with the **Indigenous peoples** as if they were fighting for their own children. Because when you fight together with indigenous peoples, it's not just a matter of solidarity. It's like you're fighting for your own family, your own children, your own grandchildren, because the indigenous populations, they protect around 82% of the world's biodiversity.

**What's your vision of the future?**

My hope for the future is being alive. And by that I don't mean just my body being alive. But our voice has to be alive. Our memory, our chants, our singing, and our womb, because you can't be alive in your body if the womb of the Earth is sick, because when the Earth is sick, we can't get food. And what's the point of keeping your body alive if all around you is dead?

**And lastly: please describe your vision of what the "re-enchantment" means.**

Re-enchantment is within us. People are very worried about this Covid emergency, about being able to touch other people and to feel an effect, a love of affection for other people. But what really is this re-enchantment? It's the love

that we feel for the rivers, for the forest, for food. We have to think that the real borders of the world, it's not the borders between Brazil and the United States, or between the Amazon and the Cerrado. The real borders of the world are the borders between racism and biodiversity. We can't drop this fight. We have to keep fighting for the biodiversity, for this cure of the Earth, and for our territories, because one who has territory has a place to return, and one who has a place to return has refuge, has warmth. And that's why we need to keep fighting.

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