

FIRES ARE NOT THE ONLY THREAT FACING THE AMAZON

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

A view of a tract in Amazon rainforest in Altamira, Brazil, after fire consumed it.AP/FileLeo Correa

Raging wildfires have drawn the world's attention to the Amazon but immolation is just one of the dangers facing the world's largest rain forest, environmental experts across the region say.

The Amazon, covering 5.5 million square km over nine countries, faces ever more serious threats from encroaching crop and livestock farming, mining, land occupations and illegal logging.

Main threat

Deforestation for farming is one of the most serious threats to the rain forest, a problem common to all nine jurisdictions: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela.

"The main cause of deforestation is the advancing agricultural boundary," said Jose Luis Capella, director of a forest plantation programme in Peru, 13% of which is covered by the Amazon basin.

A case in point is Ecuador, where agricultural land increased by 23% between 2000 and 2017 — gouged from its share of the Amazon basin region.

"This is one of the main factors in the shrinking of the rain forest," said Carmen Josse, director of the Fundacion Ecociencia in Quito.

A practice common in Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia is for farmers to set fires in the dry season to clear the undergrowth in deforested areas. However, this often leads to uncontrolled burning, which takes a greater toll on the rain forest.

Much to environmentalists' chagrin, Bolivia's government recently authorised farmers to burn 20 hectares (almost 50 acres) instead of the usual five hectares (12 acres) .

Mining too hurts

Illegal mining operations being carried out in most Amazon basin region countries causes significant damage, compounded by the use of chemicals such as mercury — particularly in gold mining — which has contaminated soil and streams.

The council of the Amerindian peoples of French Guiana declared after a recent meeting that "fire is not the only danger that threatens or destroys the Amazon. Extraction is largely responsible."

Some 29,000 hectares of rainforest have been destroyed due to both legal and illegal gold panning since 2003, according to the French territory's National Forestry Office.

Venezuela's cash-strapped government turned to the Amazon's resources after the collapse of oil prices contributed to its economic crisis.

It launched a vast project in 2016 to extract bauxite, coltan, diamonds and gold in an area of more than 110,000 sq. km of rain forest. "Mining is much more serious than the fires," said Cecilia Gomez Miliani, head of the Venezuelan environmental NGO Vitalis.

"All vegetation is cut, eliminated, and this poses problems of soil erosion, mercury contamination and population displacements."

Ms. Josse said the most worrying thing about mining is that it causes "permanent deforestation" by destroying several layers of soil, preventing regenerative growth.

In Ecuador, oil concessions encroaching on indigenous lands are also taking a toll.

In Peru, the government has deployed the Army in the Amazon to try to stop illegal mining that has flourished in remote areas long left unprotected by the State.

Colombia has also mobilised its security forces to try to protect the Amazon basin after more than 138,000 hectares of rain forest disappeared in 2018, accounting for 70% of the country's deforestation.

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