



The Amazon is being destroyed at record rates
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Coronavirus and deforestation rip through Brazil's people and the world's lungs

By [Bill Weir](#), CNN Chief Climate Correspondent

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Barra do Garças, Brazil (CNN) — They are the two nations that can't seem to bend the Covid-19 curve to save their own lives: the US and Brazil.

But while Americans complain about the [lack of testing](#) (rightly so), they need only look one country down on the list to see ... it could be so much worse.

As the virus tears through [big city favelas](#) and remote rainforest communities at the official rate of a quarter-million people per week, Brazil is providing 80% fewer tests per capita than the United States. Virologists from Brazil's major universities worry that the [numbers of infections could be 12 to 16 times higher](#).

There is no telling how grim things might get for Brazilians left largely unprotected by their President, Jair Bolsonaro. But while Bolsonaro's pandemic management influences immediate life and death for Brazilians, the far-right populist sometimes known as "Tropical Trump" also manages protection of the Amazon. And in the middle of a man-made climate crisis, earth scientists say this gives him an undue -- and scary -- influence over *all* of Life as We Know It. For generations.



A road leads through forest to land cleared for farms, near Barro da Garças in Brazil.

The Amazon is [one of Earth's most vital carbon sinks](#), a keystone of diversity and home to a tenth of the world's wildlife. Under Bolsonaro's watch, it is being destroyed at record rates.

Studies found that last year alone, 3,000 square miles were destroyed, an area almost the size of Puerto Rico. Ninety-nine percent of the deforestation came from illegal logging and slash-and-burn land grabs, while illegal gold mining not only destroyed plants and animals from thousands of species but also turned the soil into toxic sludge and sand where nothing can grow for centuries.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro stands in front of the Alvorada Palace in Brasilia, where he has been in quarantine since testing positive for coronavirus.

Since [a positive test for Covid-19 sent him into quarantine](#) in the modernist Alvorada Palace on July 7, Bolsonaro has used social media to express more sympathy for the state of the economy than tens of thousands of lives lost.

He posts complaints about his restrictions and tweets endorsements of his favorite anti-malarial drugs, unproven by science yet produced and stockpiled by the Brazilian military.

After forcing out two qualified health ministers who dared argue against his policies with science, a loyal general with no public health experience is now running the pandemic response while refusing to talk to the media.

In parallel moves, Bolsonaro ran for office in brash denial of climate science and promised not to protect "a single centimeter" of indigenous land. As last year's so-called "burning season" pushed [deforestation to the highest level in 11 years](#), he blamed Leonardo DiCaprio and other environmentalists for setting fires to make him look bad. DiCaprio [refuted Bolsonaro's accusations](#) while maintaining his support to the Brazilian people working to

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save the forest.

Farms now exist right alongside the Amazon rainforest and Brazil's indigenous tribes.

When Ricardo Galvao, an MIT-trained plasma physicist and the head of Brazil's National Institute of Space Research insisted on sharing real-time satellite data of Amazon deforestation with the world, Bolsonaro accused Galvao of fudging the numbers and fired him.

"In one special area (of protected Amazon) we gave more than 15 warnings per day there was deforestation on the scale of 10 hectares or more," Galvao told me. "There was no action by the government, no action at all. We were ignored. And when we sounded the alarm, we were fired."

An aerial view of some of 900 logs from illegal cutting that were seized by the Amazon Military Police in Amazonas State, Brazil.

Last week, Lúbia Vinhas, the general coordinator for INPE's Earth Observation Agency, was sacked after satellite data showed that [a new record 400 square miles of the Amazon was destroyed](#) in June. That's virgin rainforest bigger than Dallas, Texas, gone in a month.

Like coronavirus, Bolsonaro put the Army in charge of stopping deforestation. And critics see another example of scientific expertise ignored in favor of military fealty and a vision of unchecked economic growth.

As the pandemic raged, video of a Bolsonaro cabinet meeting released by Brazil's Supreme Court showed Environment Minister Ricardo Salles [plotting to exploit the distraction of Covid-19](#) to roll back protection of land, water and indigenous people. "Brazil is a real hell for the entrepreneur, for those who want to invest in the country and for those who want to do something even in the (working class)," Salles said in defense after his words went public. "Reports, surveys, licenses, permits are difficult."

Clarêncio Urepariwe says it's not safe to drink river water anymore.

Indigenous rights are often the strongest defense against development, and the original residents of the Amazon are being decimated by the virus. [Bolsonaro vetoed large portions of a bill that would have given them basic pandemic aid](#), including clean water.

"Water is life," Clareñcio Urepariwe told me. He is one of the dwindling Xavante people who had this edge of the Amazon to themselves for so long, their immune systems are weaker against invasive disease. "Water is where we come from and how we live. So the veto is a form of extermination. (Bolsonaro's) deputy says we should drink from the rivers but the rivers are contaminated."

It was a soybean trucker who first brought coronavirus to the geographical center of Brazil, less than a century after [a British explorer named Percy Fawcett came looking](#) for the Lost City of Z and vanished in the thick jungle.

Today that [jungle is open bean fields and cattle ranches](#) as far as the eye can see. And if Bolsonaro gets his way, most of the Amazon will be plowed, mined and paved in another century. But science warns that without the rain forest, there will be no rain. Rampant deforestation will only uncork more novel viruses, experts say, and accelerate the climate crisis as jungles turn to deserts.

"Like anywhere in the world there are good people and bad people," Fabianno Dall Agnoll says as we walk through neat rows of black bean shoots. He farms 2,000 acres in the Mato Grosso region where Fawcett vanished, and he's part of a local group vowing to "Produce, Conserve and Include."

Related Article: Brazilian native leader fights off coronavirus to take on the President

Farmer Fabianno Dall Agnoll says he wants to heal forests and relations with indigenous people.

He says hundreds of local farmers are committed to monitoring satellite deforestation data in an effort to heal forests and indigenous relations with smart land management. But the idea only works with access to the national satellite data.

Thanks to Bolsonaro's management of the environment and the pandemic, as well as corruption scandals involving him and his sons, more than 50 formal requests for impeachment of Bolsonaro have been received by Brazil's lower house of Congress. Given the fierce politics around the pandemic, there is no sign of action.

Action is coming from outside Brazil, too. Led by Norway, a group of global investors and sovereign wealth funds worth trillions recently threatened to pull their money out of Brazil.

If that doesn't lead to real enforcement, there are 27 more months before Bolsonaro is up for reelection. Or 27 pieces of the Amazon, the size of Dallas, Texas.



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