

## The pressing priority of saving the Amazonia

*The world's most biodiverse region is threatened by deforestation levels close to the point of no return. Despite this, the countries involved failed to reach agreements at the last summit in Brazil in August*

David Roca Basadre

**T**he Amazonia covers just 0.5% of the planet's surface but contains 10% of its biodiversity, making it the world's most biodiverse habitat, yet little more than a tenth of its biodiversity is known. It also contains 20% of the planet's freshwater. The transpiration of the forest also generates so-called "flying rivers", which are large quantities of water vapour transported from the surface of the Amazonia rainforest to other regions,

*Conservation of the Amazonia is thus fundamental to the balance of global ecosystems, and life would be different if the Amazonia were to disappear.*



Image of an illegal deforestation strip in the Amazonia rainforest. / Vinícius Mendonça / Ibama

where it condenses and precipitates; these "rivers" of water vapour play a crucial role in the water cycle and the global climate. Conservation of the Amazonia is thus fundamental to the balance of global ecosystems, and life would be different if the Amazonia were to disappear.

And yet, the levels of degradation/deforestation are on the verge of reaching the point of no return, of [irreparable savannisation](#), estimated at 20% of the territory. If the Amazonia is lost, the region could emit enough carbon dioxide to render useless all the international efforts invested in keeping the planet below the 1.5°C temperature increase that the scientific community considers still manageable.

But the balance of losses is alarming. Between 1985 and 2021, the Amazonia lost 75 million hectares (Mha) of forest, according to the (Red Amazónica de Información Socioambiental Georreferenciada (RAISG for its acronym in Spanish).

This process is uneven, as degradation/deforestation levels are higher in countries such as Brazil and Bolivia, where the savannisation is already a visible fact. It remains to be hoped that pristine and low degradation areas cover 74% of the Amazonia and that an additional 6% can be restored. But action is needed now.

### *Summit of Amazonian presidents*

Five of the 17 megadiverse countries (countries with the highest biodiversity index on Earth) are Amazonian - Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela - and together with the other three Amazonian countries - Bolivia, Guyana and Suriname - they had to reach transcendental agreements for their peoples and for all humanity, at the presidential summit of Amazonian countries that took place in Belém do Pará, Brazil, on 8 and 9 August.

French Guiana did not participate: the French colonial power did not even inform the representatives of the ninth-largest Amazonian country and discreetly sent its ambassador to Brazil with a message, even though the president of the host country, Lula da Silva, had invited Macron. But all were disappointed. The event's outcome was a lengthy document with several important agreements, to be sure, but no indicators to measure progress. And even less did they approve definitive agreements that attack the heart of the problem: zero deforestation by 2030 or an absolute end to fossil fuel extraction activities (gas and oil) in the Amazonia, proposals that were promoted by the main animators of the event: Gustavo Petro, from Colombia, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, from Brazil. This,

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despite the general and formal acceptance of the Initiative "Amazonia for Life: Let's protect 80% by 2025", approved with the vote of 32 countries and 541 non-governmental organisations during the 2021 Congress of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

in Marseille, France, at the initiative of indigenous organisations, to avoid the point of no return, and which was cited many times.

But even the unanimous acceptance of the concrete fact that the Amazonian territories managed by the indigenous populations remain in the best condition did not allow the real voice of the indigenous organisations to prevail.

### *The conquest of the Amazonia*

The fact that was of little consequence in the findings is that Amazonian territories, under the care of indigenous peoples and conservation areas, have suffered the least, if any, deforestation. Those responsible for Amazonian devastation are extractive activities - [particularly illegal mining](#), but also large-scale legal oil and gas extraction activities - [large infrastructure projects](#), [the expansion of agribusiness](#), [large-scale cattle ranching](#), and massive intensive small-scale agriculture and cattle ranching (including religious colonies, such as the Mennonites and others). This implies the maintenance of a colonialist process that assumes the superiority of the settler, with his technological rudiments, over the native population's gathering and hunting activities, their knowledge of the environment and its value, thus dismissing their nearly ten thousand years of occupation and adaptation to the environment—racism as an argument. History repeats itself.

Throughout the colonial period, the Amazonia was viewed with disinterest. The process of occupation began with

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greater determination in the 19th century by the newly constituted nation-states as part of their consolidation projects. Since its inception in all Amazonian countries, it has always been conflictual. The defence of native territory versus the greed or quest for survival of human groups very different

from the Amazonian natives, and without any knowledge of that ecosystem and its demands, has brought much damage, including hundreds of murders, especially of those defending their lands occupied for millennia.

Perhaps the most paradigmatic example of invasion in those early days was that of the rubber tappers who enslaved, mistreated, tortured and murdered indigenous populations in the territories of Colombia, Peru and Brazil. But there were also the invasions of poor settlers who entered the Amazonia with lifestyles formed in other ecosystems and who developed and continue to develop destructive agricultural and cattle-raising activities, suffering at the same time from the ailments inherent to their maladaptation. In a 1944 text, Dr Máxime Kuczynski, an illustrious doctor with a long career in the Peruvian Amazonia, describes the plagues and illnesses that abounded among these recent settlers and points out the contrasts with the original population: "Of many people who are now established as neophytes in the Amazonia region, it can be said that (...) they neglect the simplest

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rules of food and personal and domestic hygiene, which are fully capable of ensuring their healthy life even in this area, hostile to ignorant man.... The Indians still live in small groups, quite isolated from each other. Following a relatively clean life that avoids dense infestations with intestinal parasites; a life visibly protected by a

diet that accepts a multitude of wild foods, exempt from the "taboos" of the colonists that come in a very human manner from their eating habits".

The colonists' misunderstanding of the Amazonian territory extends to the whole process of settling there. It is accompanied by the state's desire to impose itself on the native population with the arguments of modernity and

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progress and the need to incorporate "into the homeland" those territories that, from the outset, were declared uninhabited. The low population density and the lack of agglomeration of indigenous settlers, essential to protect the Amazonia and the life that depends on it, and which, for centuries, the original inhabitants knew how to cultivate, was

used as an argument to decide the emptiness of the forest and the need to occupy it.

All this was presided over by missionary preaching. Just like the European occupation of the 16th century, the cross and the sword act with disdain for the native peoples in invasive symbiosis in the service of the various Amazonian nation-states.

### *Today*

The population of the Amazonia today is home to approximately 9% of the original indigenous people, the rest being "settlers". The IUCN recognises indigenous territories as biological corridors that promote connectivity between protected areas and allow the movement of species and the functioning of ecosystems, thus establishing a continuity of survival of the forest between the two spaces. This continuity is endangered by the lack of concern on the part of states to legally sanitise the millenary possession of indigenous lands, which are, therefore, subject to invasion and forced dispossession.

The "settler", an outsider, continues to have, except for those cases of adaptation and respect for the rainforest ecosystem, such as the exceptional case of people like Chico Mendes in Brazil, a different relationship with the environment, more one of use for personal development and the fight against poverty or for profit, which does not

obey the original Amazonian patterns, oriented towards maintaining the sources of life, their close relationship with the environment from which their cultural development has sprung.

The problem thus has two faces: on the one hand, that of large-scale extractive, agro-industrial or livestock exploitation ventures, or inadequate infrastructure works, and on the other, that of large masses of poor people from very different ecosystems who seek ways out of their situation in the Amazonia through rural activities.

In short, these structural problems have to do with the very vision, organisation and management of states.

### *Returning to Belem do Para*

Although allusions to the leading role of indigenous peoples in their contribution to the care of the Amazonia as indispensable have always predominated in the discourse of the representatives of the countries present at the Summit of Amazonian Presidents, the reality is that the States persist in a merely utilitarian vision of the territory, at the service of supposed national projects, and that they continue to use the same nineteenth-century arguments of progress, modernity and the superiority of their knowledge over that of the original inhabitants. The stubborn resistance of one of the countries - Bolivia, the second Amazonian country with the greatest amount of forest loss, but also in serious economic difficulties these days - to the proposal of zero deforestation by 2030, which blocked this decision, is the best demonstration of the expectations that continue to generate the immediate and utilitarian exploitation of the Amazonia as a sacrifice zone for the benefit of "the homeland".

At the same time, there is no overall view of the constituted States, so alternatives can be generated, not only, obviously, directly for the Amazonian territory itself, but also for the regions that provide so many poor migrants and to stop all activities, of whatever type, legal or illegal, that contribute to the degradation/deforestation of the Amazonia.

This summit of Amazonian countries, which is not the first, has nevertheless been the most transcendental due to the impetus and spirit of its main promoters: Gustavo Petro and Lula da Silva. The next meeting will be in

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Colombia in 2024. The die has been cast, the clock is ticking, and it is necessary that, beyond the specific Amazonian aspects, the leaders know how to take a more complex, comprehensive and indispensable look at the goal of not reaching the point of no return in the unfortunate path, which must be stopped, of the

destruction of the Amazonia biome.

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❖ **About the author: David Roca Basadre** is a writer, storyteller and environmental journalist.

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