



Protecting the Amazon Rainforest: Regional and Global Perspectives

Marek Wąsiński, Bartłomiej Znojek

The Amazon rainforest has particular significance in preventing climate change, so initiatives to protect the area are becoming an important reference for forest conservation across the world. The international dispute over the protection of the Amazon, triggered by the extent of wildfires a few months ago, highlights the growing challenge to reconcile global climate goals with Amazon countries' economic and social development concepts. The determination and effectiveness in protecting the rainforest by these governments will depend on close cooperation, not only financial support but also political and economic pressure from partners outside the region.

The Amazon's Importance. The Amazon region is the most biologically diverse area on Earth. It covers more than 7 million km². The largest part—over 60%—is in Brazil, with significant portions in Peru (11.4%), and Bolivia (8.5%). The remaining part is distributed across Ecuador, Guyana, French Guiana, Colombia, Suriname and Venezuela (see Figure 1). The Amazon's forests are important to the climate primarily because they absorb about 5% of global CO₂ emissions and have about 20% of the Earth's natural capacity to capture these emissions (equivalent to more than 100 Gigatons of coal). They also cool the air through the collection and evaporation of water—clouds, which reflect sunlight. The Amazon rainforest is responsible for about 16% of the Earth's land-generated oxygen, or about 6-9% if ocean-produced oxygen is taken into account. The increased shrinking of forest cover (see Figure 2) threatens its sustainability. Scientists warn that further degradation of the Amazon may become irreversible and that its complete loss would make it impossible to prevent further global warming. The rate of degradation of the rainforest is both an effect of climate change and caused by direct human actions, resulting from illegal activity and government policies.

The Amazon States on the Rainforest. In individual governments' policies on the Amazon, they combine two main objectives: protection of the forests and their economic use. Each country allows and regulates legal and controlled logging, for example, to create new farmland and pastures, mining, or infrastructure expansion (roads, hydropower plants). For example, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has sought to relax the legal protection of the Amazon (including the use of indigenous peoples' territory), because it claims that the existing legislation hinders the country's economic development. In Bolivia, the deforestation results from the development of the biofuels sector and the production of ethanol from sugarcane, and recently also from the increase in demand for beef in China. President Evo Morales' administration decided to broaden pastureland at the expense of protected areas and has allowed controlled fires for this purpose. This, though, is reportedly one of the main causes of the recent fires in Bolivia's portion of the Amazon. Only Brazil had larger fires.

The twinned challenge of conservation and sustainable use of the Amazon is countered by illegal activities, such as cutting trees and grubbing up or setting fire to land for non-authorized agricultural and mining activities. These actions frequently involve violations of the land rights of indigenous peoples and attacks on activists and enforcement services responsible for protecting the forests. They also threaten the environment by using harmful technologies (e.g., mercury is commonly used in gold ore processing). Venezuela is particularly affected by this problem, as according to the RAISG and InfoAmazonia organisations, it hosts up to 1,900 illegal mines. In Colombia, land mongers have been grabbing up areas vacated by the guerrilla FARC, which withdrew following a peace agreement with the government in 2016. The authorities of the Amazon countries also have different capacities in law enforcement. While they use satellite monitoring to view changes in the forests, inadequate control of on-the-ground services, corruption among local authorities, and impunity encourage further illegal activity. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's critics argue that arson was behind the spike in fires in August and that the president's anti-climate rhetoric, criticism of NGOs, and leniency towards criminals has worked as an incentive. The scale of the problems means that without international financial and technical support, both state and local authorities will struggle to control and prevent Amazon deforestation, much less their determination to conserve the forests.

International Initiatives to Protect the Amazon. Since the beginning of the global climate negotiations in 1992, forests, especially ones as large as the Amazon's, are treated as a key natural CO₂ sink. This approach was confirmed in Art. 5 of the Paris Agreement. The most important initiative of the UN in this area is the REDD+ programme, a mechanism to prevent deforestation and forest degradation. It aims to support with technical and financial assistance developing countries in stopping forest clearance. As part of this programme, the Green Climate Fund for the first time in February paid Brazil \$96.5 million for the documented abandonment of Amazon deforestation efforts in 2014–2015. In total, various countries and financial institutions transferred to Latin American countries \$1.23 billion in favour of combating deforestation and forest degradation (see Figure 3).

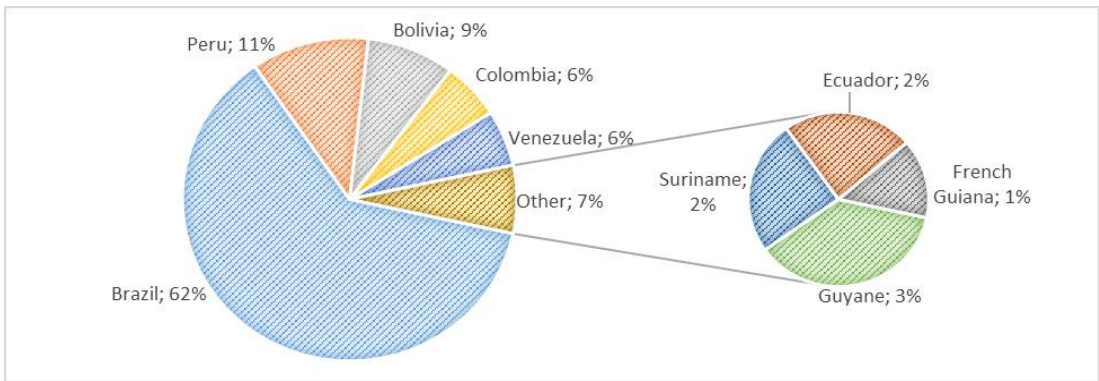
The most significant financial support for the Amazon forest is paid into an Amazon fund managed by the Brazilian National Development Bank (BNDES). It has received more than \$1.2 billion from Norway and more than \$68 million from Germany. However, the other numerous financial mechanisms are characterised by fragmentation, which weakens the transparency of the flow of funds and the efficiency of their use. Technical support is also provided by, for example, Euroclima+, an EU programme for Latin America to help tackle climate change. The main objectives of the initiative are to help monitor and gather information on, for example, deforestation (the EU also supports satellite monitoring of the forests) and advice in formulating and implementing Nationally Determined Contributions.

In addition to financial and technical assistance, the international partners of Amazon countries have the opportunity to exert political pressure. The dissemination of information about the fires in August through media and statements of leaders at the G7 summit forced Bolsonaro to send the military to assist in extinguishing the fires, among other actions. The EU has effectively made the conclusion of the negotiation of the Mercosur trade agreement conditional on Brazil remaining in the Paris Accord. The process of ratifying this deal and the potential for restrictions on mutual trade will allow the EU to continue to put pressure on the Brazilian government not to elevate economic issues above the protection of the Amazon.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The success of initiatives intended to preserve the Amazon will be a benchmark and model for the protection of key forested areas elsewhere in the region and in the world, for example, in Indonesia and Central Africa. The financing of forest protection and fire prevention remain a key challenge, which should be reflected in discussions during the December COP25 conference in Madrid.

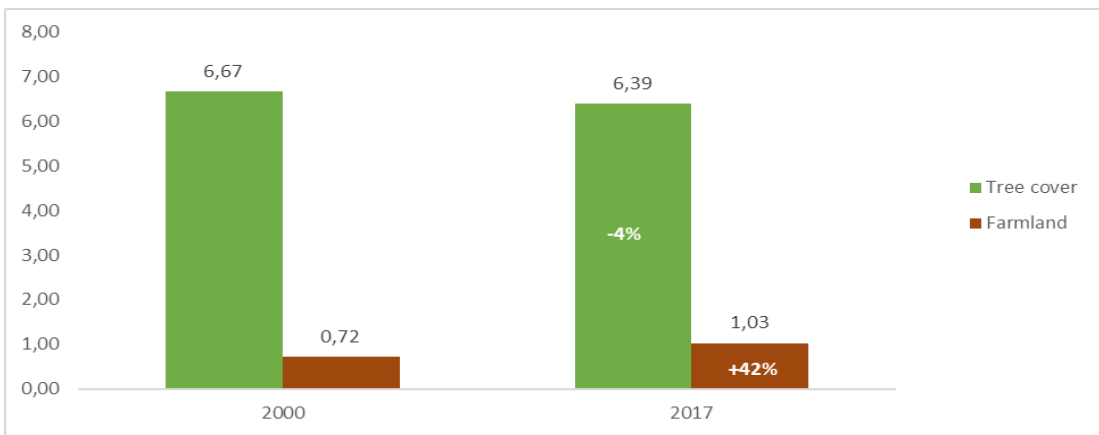
Forests cover more than 40% of the EU. Their contribution to climate protection is not as large as the equatorial forests, but they are important in achieving climate neutrality because they absorb EU emissions that cannot be reduced (e.g., from agriculture and certain industry such as cement production). However, the EU's potential for action goes beyond protecting its own forests and financing the fight against deforestation around the world. In cooperation with the Amazon countries, the emphasis should be placed on improving satellite monitoring of forests and on transparency in origin of supply of goods in terms of CO₂ emissions related to their production, for which EU importing countries are co-responsible. The European Commission, in its July 2019 Communication on Stepping up EU Action for the Conservation and Restoration of Forests in the World, announced the focus will be on increasing consumer awareness not to buy products whose manufacturing process is linked to deforestation. New solutions might also help. In the future, it will be possible to consider the actual cost of CO₂ emissions in products imported into the EU (e.g., the carbon border tax), which would reduce their competitiveness and thus discourage tree-loss in the Amazon for such activities as farming. The effectiveness of this tool may depend on other trading partners introducing it too. In addition to the pressure from the ratification process of the EU-Mercosur agreement on the conservation of the Amazon, mechanisms should be considered to introduce conditional trade restrictions in relation to deforestation.

Figure 1. Percentages of the Amazon by Country and Territory



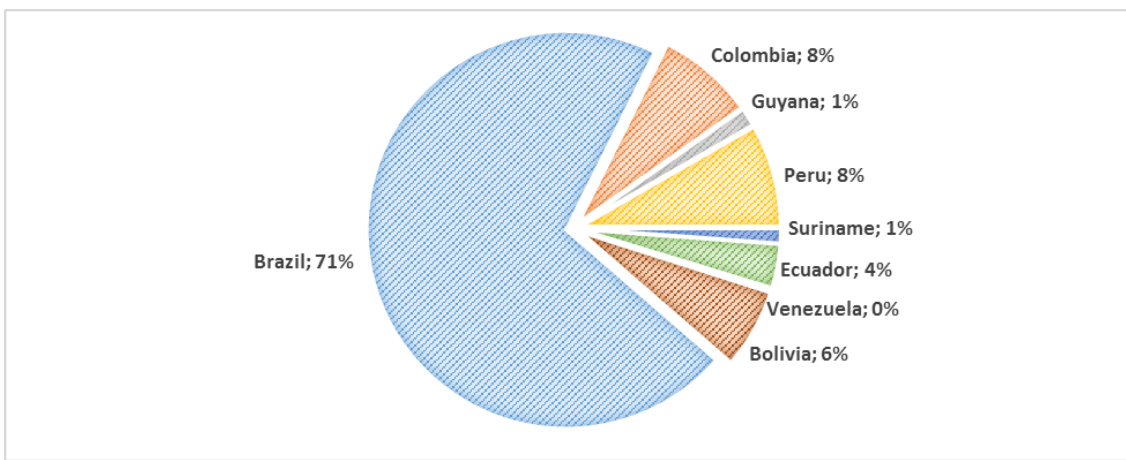
Source: Chart based on MapBiomias.org data.

Figure 2. Forest Cover vs. Agricultural Activity in the Amazon, 2000 and 2017 (million km²)



Source: Based on MapBiomias.org data.

Figure 3. Financial Support Received to Tackle Deforestation; Breakdown by Amazon State



Source: Based on Climate Funds Update data.