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Comparing the Historical Patterns of Deforestation and Conservation in the Brazilian Atlantic and Amazon Forests from 1930–2012

When the Europeans first arrived in what is now Brazilian territory in the sixteenth century, they found two major tropical forest complexes: the Atlantic Forest, originally measuring some 1,300,000 square kilometers, and the Amazon Forest, which at that time encompassed some 4,000,000 square kilometers. The different fates of these two forest complexes reveal a lot about the geography of Brazilian environmental history. Colonial and post-colonial economic activities were concentrated along the seaboard from the Northeast to the South of Brazil, the domain of the Atlantic Forest. Even today, approximately 70 percent of the Brazilian population remains concentrated in this area. In the twentieth century, with the strong growth of Brazilian population and economy—including activities like coffee plantations, timber production, the building of railways, urban construction, iron smelting and pulp production—a massive deforestation happened in the Atlantic Forest. The historical result is that only 13.3 percent of the original forest cover still exists.

The Amazon forest was left in a different situation until quite recently. Until some 40 years ago, only 1 percent of the original forest had been destroyed. A main reason for such a phenomenon is an environmental one. The difficulties of accessing the Amazon region in the pre-industrial world, especially because of the size of its rivers, the abundance of wetlands in the areas of easier access, and the occurrence of diseases hampered more intense settlement of its lands. The massive economic settlement and destruction of the Amazon forest, thus, is a very recent phenomenon. From 1970 to the present time the remaining forest cover in the Brazilian Amazon has been reduced from around 99 percent to about 80 percent, which means the destruction of more than 700,000 square kilometers of tropical woods

The history of the Atlantic forest and its incremental destruction in the last five centuries was the subject of a classical environmental history book published in 1995: *With Broadax and Firebrand - The Destruction of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest* by Warren Dean. The often quoted last sentence of the book established the need to make an analytical and political link between the history of the Atlantic and the Amazon forests: “among those Brazilians who have studied the history of the Atlantic forest and appreciate the presence of its remnant stands, the Amazon forest inspires special alarm and foreboding. The last service that the Atlantic forest might serve, tragically and forlornly, is to demonstrate all the terrible consequences of destroying its immense western neighbor.”

However, we must not consider the history of the Atlantic and the Amazon forests, despite its specificities, as separate realities. They are part of the same process of land occupation and territory building in Brazil. The economic and social actors that have been destroying the Amazon forest since the 1970s came mainly from the southeastern parts of coastal Brazil. On a broad perspective, the establishment of a “deforestation arc” in the southern parts of the Amazon forest was a consequence of the historical move towards the West of economic activities and semi-spontaneous migrations backed by the Brazilian state as part of a macro-“development” project.

The massive destruction of the Atlantic forest happened from the 1930s until 1993, when a federal decree, turned into law in 2006 by the Brazilian Congress, established the protection of these last remainings. Thus, most of this deforestation took place prior to the conceptual revolution that happened in the last decades, in the world as well as in Brazil, in relation to the image of the Tropical Forests. Kelly Enright conceptualizes this paradigm shift as the diffusion of the “rainforest ideal,” overcoming the image of the “jungle” and transforming the representation of tropical forests from “a place that endangered human lives” to “an endangered place invested with the power to save human lives.”

This “conservationist turn” was starting to rise during the 1970s, the same time as the Amazon forest was starting to be severely destroyed. The political, social, and scientific discussions in relation to the future of the Amazon have been growing since that time. But in the case of the Amazon, with more than 80 percent of its original coverage still there, the economic and political context is very different from the Atlantic one. In fact we are observing the rise of a new and still imperfect consensus in various sectors of Brazilian society, including the federal state, about the need to save that still enormous Northern forest. The growth of this political imperative helps to understand the fact that deforestation in the Amazon was reduced by more than 75 percent between 2004 and 2012. Deforestation is declining even in the context of strong economic growth.

In any case, it is important to compare the history of the Atlantic and the Amazon forests since 1930, analyzing the similarities and differences, as well as the direct historical links present in both processes of deforestation and conservation. In order to do it, of course, we need to discuss the biophysical and ecological differences between both forest complexes. And also the different chronological and historical contexts and social forces related to the movements of deforestation and conservation in the two macro-regions.