

A Healthier Amazon Jungle

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Last month, Brazil's environmental officials announced that the burning of the Amazon has slowed. Deforestation this year is half of what it was the year before. This news shows that when Brazil's government musters the political will to protect the Amazon, it can do it.

Large swaths of the jungle are still disappearing, mainly set on fire by soybean farmers and ranchers looking for land to raise cattle. Last year was the worst for Amazon deforestation in a decade.

The health of the Amazon is a global concern because the forest soaks up greenhouse gases, which lessens global warming. Deforestation means the Amazon could eventually become too small to produce the rain that it needs to survive.

Deforestation is also deadly for millions of Amazon peasants trying to eke out a living growing small plots or collecting forest products. Land grabbers snatch up valuable property near planned paved roads, burning the villages to drive the inhabitants away. Hundreds of leaders who have tried to speak up for peasants have been murdered, and virtually none of the killers ever face jail.

Unfortunately, part of the reason farmers and ranchers cleared less jungle this year is because the price of soybeans and beef have dropped, and Brazil's currency is stronger. So exports are less profitable.

But the government's commitment to protecting the Amazon has also been important. Led by Marina Silva, the environment minister and once a poor Amazon rubber tapper herself, Brazil is starting to impose its authority in parts of the forest that have always been lawless. In the state of Pará in February, gunmen killed Dorothy Stang, an American nun who had worked with the rural poor for 30 years. After the murder, the government sent 2,000 federal troops to the zone and announced a logging ban on millions of acres of Amazon land.

The government has also begun to enforce its laws. It is beginning to require real documentation of claims for land title. In June, police arrested dozens of members of an illegal clear-cutting ring. Finally, through new satellite imaging, Brazilian authorities can spot burning while it is happening and theoretically make arrests. Rule of law is still foreign to the Amazon. But it is becoming a little less so.