

The Rape Of The Rainforest... And The Man Behind It

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The Independent - UK

5-20-5

It is stark. It is scarcely believable. But the ruthless obliteration of the Amazon rainforest continues at a headlong rate new figures reveal - and today we reveal the man who more than any other represents the forces making it happen.

He is Blairo Maggi, the millionaire farmer and uncompromising politician presiding over the Brazilian boom in soya bean production. He is known in Brazil as O Rei da Soja - the King of Soy.

Brazilian environmentalists are calling him something else - the King of Deforestation. For the soya boom, feeding a seemingly insatiable world market for soya beans as cattle feed, is now the main driver of rainforest destruction.

Figures show that last year the rate of forest clearance in the Amazon was the second highest on record as the soy boom completed its third year. An area of more than 10,000 square miles - nearly the size of Belgium - was cut down, with half the destruction in the state of Mato Grosso, where Mr Maggi, whose Maggi Group farming business is the

world's biggest soya bean producer, also happens to be the state governor.

Mr Maggi sheds no tears over lost trees. In 2003, his first year as governor, the rate of deforestation in Mato Grosso more than doubled.

In an interview last year he said: "To me, a 40 per cent increase in deforestation doesn't mean anything at all, and I don't feel the slightest guilt over what we are doing here. We are talking about an area larger than Europe that has barely been touched, so there is nothing at all to get worried about."

Many people violently disagree. The survival of the Amazon forest, which sprawls over 4.1 million sq km (1.6 million sq miles) and covers more than half of Brazil's land area, may be the key to the survival of the planet. The jungle is sometimes called the world's "lung" because its trees produce much of the world's oxygen. It is thought nearly 20 per cent of it has already been destroyed by legal and illegal logging, and clearance for cattle ranching. But the soya boom has dramatically stepped up the pace of destruction.

It began on the back of the BSE crisis in Britain, when the feed given to cattle suddenly became a matter of intense public concern. Cattle feed producers around the world switched to soya as an untainted source.

The boom was intensified by the fact that Brazil - in contrast to the US and Argentina - did not go down the GM route in its agriculture, so when most European countries went GM-free, it was from Brazil that they sought their soya bean supplies. Europe now imports 65 per cent of its soya from Brazil. A further impetus to the boom is coming from China, whose emerging middle class wants to eat more and more meat - so the demand for animal feed is soaring.

The soya boom is bitterly criticised by environmentalists. "It is turning the rainforest into cattle feed. It is gross," said John Sauven, head of the rainforest campaign for Greenpeace UK.

It first showed up in the deforestation figures in 2003, when after falling or staying steady for eight years, the rate of destruction leapt by 40 per cent in a single year, from 18,170 sq km to 25,500 sq km.

Since then the rate has stayed at its new high level, with 24,597 sq km cut down the next year, and, as the figures released yesterday by the Brazilian environment ministry showed, from satellite photos and other data, no less than 26,130 sq km of rainforest was cut down in the 12 months to August 2004. This was a further leap of 6 per cent on the year before and caused immense dismay, not least because President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's government adopted an action plan last year to protect the Amazon. The Environment Minister, Marina Silva, who is from the Amazon state of Acre, said the figure was high, but promised the country would "work to fight this in a structured way, with lasting and effective action, involving all sectors".

Greenpeace's Amazon co-ordinator Paulo Adario said the scale of the destruction was a tragedy, and showed that deforestation was "not a priority for the Lula government".

Mr Maggi, whose company grossed \$600m last year, does not see the future as one of restricted soya plantings. He has called for a tripling of the amount of land planted with soybeans during the next decade in Mato Grosso, and his company announced last year that it intended to double the area it has in production.

How demand for soya drives the destruction

The production of soya beans is now a vital industry for Brazil. Agribusiness is the country's number one export

earner, and soya is the principal commodity. The current government under President Lula actively promotes soya export as a means to earn foreign exchange for debt payments.

From the 1960s, the Brazilian government promoted soya cultivation so Brazil could become self sufficient in vegetable oils. Soya was increasingly planted on large-scale, fully mechanised farms in the south and the states on the Atlantic coast.

In the past, some agro-engineers believed soya would never threaten the rainforest, because of climatic limitations and soil conditions. Soya was thought to be "as adaptable to conditions of the tropical climate as a panda bear to the African savannah".

However, the development of new varieties has enabled the rapid expansion of soya plantations north, into the tropical states where the rainforest is situated.

Between 1995 and 2004, the area cultivated with soya increased by 77 per cent in the centre-west, with Mato Grosso becoming the single biggest producer. Now soya is rapidly advancing from all sides toward the heartland of the Amazon, fuelling massive deforestation.

Two companies dominate Brazil's soya business. Gruppo Maggi, owned by Blairo Maggi, Mato Grosso's governor, is considered to be the world's largest individual soya producer. The number one soy-exporter is the giant US grains business, Cargill.

- Michael McCarthy

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