

20 July 2006 08:36

- [Home](#)
- > [News](#)
- > [Environment](#)

Eating the Amazon: The fight to curb corporate destruction

Huge soya farms financed by Cargill, the largest privately owned company in the world, are the rainforest's new worst enemy

By Daniel Howden

Published: 17 July 2006

The scars are unmistakably man made. Hard-edged squares and rectangles, hundreds of acres across, hacked and burned out of the Amazon rainforest. The dark green of the canopy is lacerated with thin red lines - the illegal dirt roads that stitch together these giant clearings.

Seen from the air, this fearful symmetry marks out the battle lines of an invasion that has seen the humble soya bean emerge as the greatest threat to the world's most important rainforest.

On the ground, what was once a thriving ecosystem supporting at least 300 tree species for every hectare, is now a wasteland. Dead roots and dry grass crunch underfoot and the breeze throws up dust from eroded soil.

Three hours' drive outside the city of Santarem in Para state, along dirt trails struck by illegal loggers, you arrive in a vast monoculture inside the Tapajos National Park. Soya fields laden with the dry brown seed pods stretch in every direction.

This is Father Edilberto Sena's parish. The fiery local priest has emerged as a fierce critic of the land-grabbers, loggers, ranchers and agrobusiness multinationals pushing further and further into the rainforest.

The Amazon basin is home to one in 10 of the world's mammals and 15 per cent of the world's land-based plant species. It holds more than half of the world's fresh water and its vast forests act as the largest carbon sink on the planet, providing a vital check on the greenhouse effect.

Brazil has overtaken the United States as the world's leading exporter of soya. The protein-rich bean has become a profitable link in the processed food chain and 80 per cent of world production is fed to livestock. Brazilian soya beans are feeding Europe's growing hunger for cheap meat substitutes, and have overtaken logging and cattle ranching as the main engine of deforestation.

Three years ago, the agrobusiness giant Cargill, the largest privately owned company in the world, opened a soya port in Santarem. And Father Edilberto has set himself on a collision course with the Minnesota multinational that he says represents the worst of rapacious capitalism. Father Edilberto has used the church-funded Radio Rurale de Santarem as a means of fighting back against the incursions of the illegal loggers, ranchers and soya farmers, who in turn supply the grain giants.

"We are small and we are fighting multinationals like Cargill - people who are using soya as a commodity. I'm sure there are at least 200,000 listening. Our objective is to educate the people, provide critical and objective news."

It is less than 18 months since another rainforest campaigner and champion of Brazil's rural poor, Sister Dorothy Stang, was murdered in broad daylight further east in Para state, in the city of Anapu. After death threats, the US-born, naturalised Brazilian nun was assassinated by gunmen allied to illegal ranchers.

"I don't need a uniform," says the outspoken priest, who eschews the Catholic garb for a green polo shirt and an indigenous necklace. "My uniform is my face and my mouth. People know I'm a priest."

Lately he has started to receive the same kind of threats that preceded the murder of Sister Dorothy. "Two months ago, some crazy, nuts guy posted on the internet that the best thing they could do with Father Edilberto Sena was to kill me."

"When I heard about this, the first moment I had a coldness in my spine."

The priest's frequent broadsides against the vested interests eating into the Amazon have made him powerful enemies, and the diocese has come under heavy pressure, he claims, to muzzle him. "The elite, they got mad at us and told the bishop to close us down."

For now, it seems the Bishop's support is holding and Radio Rurale is still on air, but Father Edilberto launched an impassioned appeal for help to international church leaders visiting the area as part of a major environmental conference organised by the Greek-based NGO, Religion, Science and the Environment. The symposium is the latest initiative by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the Eastern Orthodox pope who has been preaching against the sin of environmental destruction for more than a decade.

"The Church needs to take sides," says Father Edilberto. "With what we are facing we need all the allies we can find."

Santarem, a riverside city hundreds of miles upstream into the Amazon, has found itself at the centre of the soya boom. Last year, Brazil produced more than 50 million tons of soya across nearly 23 million hectares, an area about the size of the United Kingdom. Soya production remains relatively contained within the Amazon biome, but the decision to locate a major soya port this deep into the basin is inviting a catastrophe, according to conservation groups.

In the past three years, nearly 70,000 square kilometres of the Amazon rainforest have been destroyed. The smoke from burning trees pushed Brazil into the top four of global greenhouse gas producers in 2004. Despite commitments from the government of President Lula da Silva, the destruction of the Amazon rainforest continues.

Almost three-quarters of it occurs illegally. Brazil's award-winning Environment Minister, Marina da Silva, speaking at the RSE symposium, was keen to point to progress being made in slowing the rate of deforestation. According to government figures based on a satellite survey, there was a 32 per cent decrease in the rate of deforestation last year.

With satellite monitoring stations now in place and providing an annual overview of the Amazon basin to the general public, the deforestation is no longer taking place unknown to the authorities. But that may not be enough, she admitted.

"We need to create the feeling that we are being watched all the time and that those who are doing something wrong will be caught and punished. In some countries it is already too late. It's not too late here. We can still save it," Ms da Silva said.

But the cycle of deforestation where state-owned reserves are infiltrated by loggers and ranchers looking for "free land" now has a third and more lethal phase, where the cleared land is sold to soya producers who intensively farm the soil until it can no longer bring a harvest. The cutters then move to new areas and the process is repeated. Within as little as three years, rich and fertile rainforest supporting incredible biodiversity can be reduced to a desert.

Cargill's giant silos now dominate the shore in Santarem, on a site which used to be a beach used by local fishermen. The food multinational has been accused by Greenpeace of illegally setting up this conveyor belt facility which delivers exclusively to the European market, and caters for more than one-third of the UK's imports of soya.

The family-owned behemoth, with a turnover of more than \$7bn (£3.8bn) and offices in a replica French chateau in Minnesota, is the undisputed ruler of the global grain trade. As the company website says: "We buy, trade, transport, blend, mill, crush, process, refine, season, distribute and deliver around the clock and around the globe."

It also owns British-based Sun Valley foods, which processes a million chickens a week into fresh and frozen, supermarket wrapped products. Its major clients are McDonald's and the Morrisons chain.

Later this summer the Brazilian high court is due to rule on whether Cargill's facility should be shut down. Already, two lower courts have ruled against Cargill on the grounds that the company did not complete the necessary environmental impact study before opening the facility. But orders to temporarily suspend operations have been overturned by a barrage of appeals to higher courts.

Cargill, in an official statement, has rebutted these claims, saying that the court battle is all over a technicality. "Cargill followed all the permitting requirements of the applicable government agencies for the construction and operation of the Santarem facility," the company said in a statement. Cargill continues to insist that the legal action relates only to the specific kind of impact study it should have conducted. Cargill also maintains that its practices are transparent and that it is "committed to sustainable development which creates income to support thriving communities and enables environmental management over time".

Meanwhile, the conveyor belt keeps moving, the tankers keep coming, and the grain keeps making its way to the fast-food counters and supermarket shelves of Europe.

Cargill has not limited itself to sourcing, processing and shipping. It also provides the financing needed to keep the expansion of soya going. Brazilian banks will not lend to farmers with no title to their lands, so Cargill steps into the breach, providing loans for everything from bulldozers and chainsaws to seeds and harvesters.

Cayetano Scannavino Filao has been working with indigenous people inside the Tapajos for nearly two decades. "When I came here from Sao Paulo 20 years ago, all of this was forest. It is enough to make you cry," he said. He helps to run a local NGO, Health and Happiness, which works with the remote and impoverished communities that have found themselves in the way of big agrobusiness. The region is home to 220,000 people from 180 different indigenous groups, many of whom live deep in the forest and are dependent on the rainforest and the river for everything from food and tools to medicines and shelter.

"Today we have a conflict situation," he laments. "Since the opening of the port, deforestation in this area has increased by 511 per cent. I'm not against soya, I'm against soya in the Amazon biome. We used to fight the loggers, but the loggers, they eat the Amazon in small bites; the soya is eating the Amazon in big bites."

Tarcisio Feitosa da Silva, who works for an environment agency in the remote Acre region of the Amazon, has seen with his own eyes how big those bites can be. In many cases, the illegal invaders don't even bother with logging. In the worst cases, earth-movers are sent in to bulldoze priceless primary forest into giant pits where the logs are then burnt.

"They bulldoze the trees into big holes in the ground and they burn what's left," Mr da Silva said. The great trunks, he says, can take more than a fortnight to burn, and keep smouldering for months after. It was in the context of this kind of assault that the federal government acted to stop the extinction of the Brazil nut tree, a national icon and a profitable and sustainable source of revenue for the people of the Amazon.

The result of the consequent ban on cutting the tree is testament to the irrational and violent threat facing a rainforest vital to the survival of the planet. The Brazil nut trees now stand like sentinels towering over the sea of soya. Preserved while all around them their ecology is destroyed, they are destined to die of loneliness.

Stripped of supporting vegetation their fate is to perish from exposure to a tropical sun that only their highest branches were ever meant to see. Those that endure will be charred black in August, when the farmers torch the crops ready to plant next season's crop of soya.