

DEFORESTATION FUELS THE AMAZON FIRES

By Alex Pollock

A record number of fires ravaging the Amazon has drawn international outrage because of the rainforest's importance to the global environment and prompted Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro to dispatch the military to assist in firefighting. *(Reuters)*

Overview of the current situation

The Amazon – the world's largest rainforest and river basin – stretches across nine South American countries and is home to over one million indigenous people. While fires are regular and natural in the Amazon during the dry season (July to October), there has been an 80% increase in fires since August 2018. In the Brazilian part of the Amazon, there have been more than 57,500 fires this year. On 9 August, Brazil's largest state, Amazonas, declared a state of emergency, while other states have been placed on environmental alert. 60% of the rainforest is in Brazil, but the fires are also affecting populations in neighbouring Bolivia and Peru.



A tropical rain forest is generally not flammable since the dense plants are full of water, but the fires that are currently raging are primarily along the periphery where ongoing human activities weaken the forest and make it vulnerable. The majority of the fires were set to clear land for cattle ranching, soybean plantations, mining and related infrastructure development (such as roads). Since it is currently the dry season, fires are much more prone to spreading beyond containment.

Deforestation and the environmental impact

While the rate of deforestation of the Amazon had declined by more than 80% since it peaked in 2004, there has been a concerning uptrend since July 2018 (increasing by 278%). A more lenient stance on environmental policy by Brazil's new far-right government is thought to be fuelling the increase, with a growing number of farmers burning more land for economic gain.

According to Thomas Lovejoy (an ecologist and professor in Environmental Science and Policy), deforestation of the Amazon has entered a dangerous cycle, where the loss of forest creates a drier environment, spurring on more fires. Since the rainforest generates most of its rainfall itself, as trees are destroyed, rainfall decreases. Experts are concerned that the forest could reach a point of no return, where it resembles a savannah more than a rainforest.

But despite the very real concerns of massive deforestation, not only in the Amazon but in various other parts of the world as well, a study published in the science journal *Nature* (conducted by researchers out of the University of Maryland) points to progress made in the process of "reforestation". New trees have been planted in areas that had previously been barren, and the increase in global temperature has allowed new growth to occur in deserts, tundra areas, and on mountains. According to *Forbes*, areas in China and Africa are leading the reforestation efforts.

Bolsonaro and economic policy

When Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, his campaign message included the idea of opening up the Amazon more to business. Since coming to power, Mr Bolsonaro has lessened fines for fires and has significantly cut funding for Brazil's environmental agency that monitors and protects the Amazon. Mr Bolsonaro initially claimed that the fires in the Amazon this year were normal, before blaming non-government organisations (NGOs) for setting fires to undermine his administration (no evidence has been presented to substantiate that claim).

While Mr Bolsonaro received heavy criticism from global leaders for his apparent lack of effort in controlling the fires, he has also been praised by Brazilians who see his focus on economic development as a welcome sign of change in economically troubling times. An opinion poll found that 60% of Brazilians think Mr Bolsonaro's administration has done

a great, good, or normal job. However, world leaders – notably Emmanuel Macron of France – have threatened to pull out of trade deals if Brazil does not do more to combat the fires.

Mr Bolsonaro has said that Brazil does not have the resources to adequately fight the fires, and has deployed military forces to assist. Foreign aid of \$20 million was offered by the G7 countries to help contain the fires, but Mr Bolsonaro warned European countries not to get involved, claiming the money was offered as an attempt to undermine Brazil's sovereignty.

Central African fires

While much of the world's attention is currently focused on Brazil, it is important to know that Central Africa is also experiencing an increase in fires. In a 48-hour period where Brazil had just over 2,000 active fires, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo had 6,902 and 3,395 active fires, respectively. The Amazon is one of three tropical rainforests, with the other two in the Congo and Southeast Asia.

There has been an increase in illegal 'slash and burn' activities in Central Africa (clearing land for cultivation), raising concerns about the stability of the Congo tropical forest. Mr Macron has also proposed a foreign aid package to help Angola and the Congo control their forest fires.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Astrophysicist and Christian apologist Hugh Ross (in *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*) points out the following important aspect of God and His creation: "God has marvellously designed the universe, the earth, and all its life in such a way as to harmonise ethics and economics. When we humans face a crisis or dilemma that appears to force a choice between ethics and economics, we can be sure God has provided a solution that compromises neither. God calls humanity to resist the temptation of quick fixes, particularly those that demand either a breach of ethics or a loss of economic stability." Unfortunately, in the modern age of 'instant everything', humans tend to seek the easiest, quickest solutions, which often leads to unfortunate compromises.

The Lord instructed humans at the dawn of creation to be good stewards of their environment, and thus, when faced with environmental challenges like the Amazon fires, people can be sure that the Lord has a solution, and if He is consulted, He will reveal it (in a variety of ways). Christian author Stephen Mattson points out: "The sad reality is that Natural Revelation – the splendour and wonder of creation – doesn't really exist for millions of people living in conditions where their environment is being exploited for corporate and political gain. Pollution, destruction, and the exploitation of our world isn't a victimless crime – it's intentionally hiding God from others, and the act of making our earth less desirable is blinding others to the goodness of God. If Christians seriously want others to experience God, they should start making the earth a better place – ultimately reflecting the magnificence of God."

PRAY

- **For the Brazilian government to balance the environmental and economic needs of their people**
- **For believers in positions of authority to make meaningful contributions towards the wise management of resources**
- **For believers to lead the way in demonstrating good stewardship, on community and regional levels**

IMAGE SOURCE:

<https://america.cgtv.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/AP.brazil-bolsonaro-amazon-fires-770x502.jpg>