

Special Feature

Field research notes on Amazon deforestation during the Bolsonaro era

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An excerpt from field research diaries, after finishing a trip by car from Cuiabá to Santarém by Highway BR163, to study the situation of Amazon deforestation, fires, soybean, ranching and mining business, and other recent events. In these fieldnotes, I wrote down the immediate feelings based on the last part of the trip. I travelled together with a journalist, a guide, and a driver.

We left Moraes de Almeida in the early morning for a long ride to Itaituba. On the way, we saw the smoke from several fires, and were looking for a fire to film. Soon a just-started fire appeared on the roadside. The fire starter had apparently just left the place, as the flames were starting to eat the felled trees and green grass, alongside the other vegetation that had been prepared by cutting for burning. There were big trees among the burning forest remnants. The atmosphere was tense, our driver got really scared, and wanted us to leave the scene as soon as possible. The sun was blazing hot, and the flames were feeding into the heat. There was thick smoke and flying debris and pieces of ashy leaves in the air, going here and there with the changes of the wind. Heavy trucks passed us now and then, when we tried to film the fires. The journalist wanted to capture the rattling sound of the fire spreading, but trucks kept passing us quite often.

Soon a lady appeared by the roadside, and we went to ask from her what she knew about the fires. She spoke to the camera: she was living on the other side of the highway BR163. She brought her kids to go to the school. They embarked next to the flaming Amazon for the school bus. A normal day in the Amazon: fires behind you as you step into the school bus, not caring at all about putting them down. The lady said that the fire will rage until it has burned all it can, and only if it jumps the road would they try to quell it. Now the fire was going to eat all the vegetation until it reached a river. Our driver got ever-more nervous as we lingered on the crime scene, as recently several volunteer firefighters had been imprisoned by the police of the Bolsonaro regime in the Amazon, as they belonged to an NGO. Several commentators claimed that the President and his minions wanted to believe and claim that NGOs would be the ones setting up fires in the Amazon, alongside doing other environmental crimes, which they just invent and create to get money and fool people. An older man then appeared at the scene, a farmer, and the situation looked possibly dangerous, so we drove a bit further; also, to stay away from the spreading fire. However, the old man was a neighbour who had arrived to the area 40 years ago from the Espírito Santo state in Southeast Brazil, when there was not yet even the BR163 road. He said the place burning was held by a guy from Itaituba, 80 km to the north, who had probably set it on fire for speculative reasons to sell it to would-be land buyers from the south, hungry for new areas to plant on. Our driver agreed that that

land was certainly one of those where the guy did not have the right papers of ownership. The old man gave a good interview, saying how absurd it was that some people were cutting 500 hectares or more of rainforest: for what? He was happy with his plantation of small size, and did not understand how someone would need such huge areas.

We visited the farm of the lady with the kids close-by, to film their life, and then hit the road again. We bumped into a long line of trucks on the roadside, waiting for the last bits of BR163 paving works to be finished. The road was practically finished as we drove past it, until Itaituba. Before that, we hunted for a few more places with fires on the way. It had been dry for 3 days, and many people were setting up fires to clear land and burn trees and grass, and preparing new areas for burning by cutting trees. We arrived to Miritituba port and took a boat ride to film the Bunge and Cargill and other companies' soybean and corn export facilities, where the 4000 daily passing trucks were pouring their loads of rainforest-turned-into-GM soybean and corn, covered with layers of different agro toxins – onto barges of enormous size. The barges were lumped into packs of five by five or more, ready to be taken to greater ports for an overseas voyage beyond several seas, to finally reach the mouths of pigs in China, and other soy-fed animals held in their position as weight-earners in the food chain in different parts of the world.

In Itaituba we tried to look for a gold shop the morning of the next day, to ask if we could film them purifying the gold and buying it. Almost all shops said no. This was a shady business, and the town was pro-mining, living off the yellow mineral stripped from the depths of the soil underneath the trees and waters of the Amazon. This was an illegal mining boom town; its commerce seemed to be lively, given the high number of gold miners on the Transamazônica Highway and the Tapajós river areas. I took a photo from the street of an interesting looking gold shop, which had a cartoon on the wall about how to become a legal miner. A while after this the shop owner came out complaining to us in the street, nervous about us taking photos. No one knew who someone really was here. The police had ramped up their operations in the region recently, burning and confiscating mining equipment found ever-deeper inside indigenous and conservation lands, in illegal and highly destructive projects which left behind muddy waters, mercury, and long-lasting diseases for the fish-eating and water-using populations, alongside forest devastation. We went further on looking for a shop, and finally found one suitable, which showed us the process, and talked with us about the business and its problems. The young man in the shop was nice, and did not accept our money for showing us how he purified a 550€ piece of gold.

After this we went to visit the Munduruku indigenous people on the Jamanxim river, driving on the Transamazônica until the Buburé port, and taking a small boat from there, driven by a young Munduruku man. We stopped after some rapids, along gorgeous tall trees on the riversides, to the place where the local Munduruku had recently marked the borders of their territory by signs and had cut a patrolling route that lasted three days to walk in the forest. The sign showed a Munduruku holding a severed head in his hand, the message thus being clear for trespassers. The young Munduruku man was standing attentively and silently, being present, in the woods. It was a noble sight, of another time–space, after the business of the city and the hastiness of gold diggers. He pointed out to me a large bird in the canopy, one I had not seen before. We continued the boat ride. A heavy rain and thunder storm followed us, leaving us completely soaked after the first drops had warned us. The driver was excellent. I do not know how he managed with the boat, as I could not see much at all, although I had on sunglasses: the rain was pouring so hard that I felt like being in a hailstorm shower. I had barely managed to take off my clothes, leaving only my Bermuda's on: it was lucky I had them readily available, and that all my other gear was water-proofed. The others got badly soaked in the storm. We arrived dramatically to the indigenous village, rising up a steep

hill among vegetation, carrying our gear in the midst of thunder strikes and heavy rain. I was happy, the rain felt purifying, and it was energizing to walk up the hill with a heavy load.

We stayed for two nights in hammocks in the village. I walked to the forest alone at the end of the day. It was magical, hearing the sounds of monkeys and feeling the presence of something even bigger than the big trees next to the swidden cultivation areas. The sun was setting beautifully, and the villagers were playing football, kids were having fun on the field as well. Earlier we had gone swimming in an igarapé. I spent some time on that small river alone in the morning, swimming a bit and doing exercises. Such a beautiful, serene, tranquil riverside in the midst of trees, down in a gorge. The casique, and other villagers besides the chief gave beautiful interviews on what the Amazon and forests mean to them, revealing how different their way of relating with and being in the world is in comparison to most people. And how they almost naturally tend to thus protect nature, as they are part of it. They explained how they are also animals, as well as the trees and the food: without one, the forest, there will not be food for them when they are animals, for example.

On the next day, we left early for a ride to see whether loggers had left the Munduruku lands, or if they had expanded their illegal operations, which the Munduruku had found out about a bit earlier. We drove for a couple of hours upriver on the Jamanxim river, seeing several illegal garimpos, gold mining rafts, on the way. We also saw illegal acai palm heart collectors on the way, carrying boatloads of their loot to the markets, having destroyed the possibilities for the Munduruku to collect acai for selling or eating, or to give to their children, by cutting down the acai tree for the sake of its inner palm meat. We stopped a bit before the logging area to set up drones in the air, to see if there were loggers in the dangerous areas, wherein the casique wanted to avoid an armed conflict, and focus on dialogue. He said the loggers did not respect them or the forest, they had broken their deal of not returning to the area. Someone had already sold these lands, as six pieces, to others to be exploited as garimpos in Bolsonaro's new schemes. The Munduruku wanted to set up a fire on the cut down forest to establish a new village on the site, with plantations, to avoid the loggers grabbing their lands. The logging site was empty, but tracks showed someone had been there the day before. We ventured a bit uphill inland on a gorgeous forest road, but soon turned back. We hastily left the area, as motor sounds were heard: we managed to escape without being noticed, the mission here being just to check what was the situation, before action.

We continued to the town with 28 Mundurukus with us in the boat, and as many as we could fit in our van. The next day we had a great and long informal discussion with environmental officers about the whole region, and then managed to talk to the mayor, a big land grabber and rancher, at one of his ranches. The sun was setting as we got there. The Nelore bulls were stepping out of our way as we tracked the old man, who told us about how he had become successful, and how he did not believe in deforestation anymore. However, as the mayor had left, his farm manager told me that the area was deforested last year, not long ago, as the mayor had claimed, and that they did use poisons, unlike what the mayor claimed. There was apparently no end to the will to increase profit-making production lines by the mayor, who had already, in his own words, monthly 60 kg producing gold mining facilities in three garimpos 500 km away, 14,000 bulls, and 7000 cows, alongside fish tanks bringing in 3 million Reais a month, and many other businesses in the pipeline, taken care of by his 600 employees. The pastures seemed badly eroded. The forests seemed to be trying to hide from his greedy eye, which had for long been eyeing to turn them into grasslands, or take away the tallest of their trees by logging.

The next day we drove to Santarém. On the way, we stopped for filming in Belterra on a soybean field that had been waiting to be planted after a month or so. An angry and very upset southern man appeared into the field, angrily telling us that we could not film, and were trespassing and invading

private property, demanding to see our documents. We agreed to leave and said we were sorry. They asked if we were from an NGO. Military police had stopped all cars on our way before, in Transamazônica before Rurópolis, asking five times ‘You are not from an NGO, are you?’ Experts called this complete paranoia, or then as strategic orders from the regime to harass all NGOs by portraying them as the evil-doers and culprits for the wrongs the regime and its supporters themselves did: the damage done to the Amazon and to the planet, and to so many lives and futures. Darkness. The farmer coming to harass us was possibly himself guilty of just having started the fire whose smoke clouds we could see not far away behind the soybean silos, and vast open fields in the midst of rainforest, not far from the Amazon and Tapajós rivers. His anger could be explained by he himself being the invader, as most of these lands were state lands, grabbed by southern men like him from Brazil’s three southernmost states, with the gun and corruption, to be stripped of forests. In the tense mood, we drove to the Pindobal beach through Belterra, swimming and dropping off the roadside stress into the cooling and clear waters of the Tapajós, on the long, sandy beach.

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