Brazilian Amazon deforestation surge is real despite Bolsonaro's denial

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Brazilian Amazon deforestation surge is real despite Bolsonaro's denial (commentary)

Commentary by Philip M. Fearnside on 29 July 2019

- *June 2019 saw an 88 percent increase in Amazon deforestation over the same month in 2018. In the first half of July 2019, deforestation was 68 percent above that for the entire month of July 2018, according to INPE, Brazil's federal monitoring agency.*

- *However, far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office in January, is denying the accuracy of his own government statistics, calling INPE's data "lies."*

- *Like US President Trump, Bolsonaro has a history of denying scientific data and facts when they conflict with his ideology and policies, including the need for action to combat the escalating climate crisis.*

- *The conservation outlook for the rest of Bolsonaro's four-year term is grim; he has in just six months dismantled Brazil's environmental agencies, deforestation program and environmental licensing system. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

Brazil's Amazonian deforestation in June 2019 was 88 percent greater than for the same month in 2018, and deforestation in the first half of July was 68 percent above that for the entire month of July in 2018. There is no reason to question INPE's current deforestation numbers from the DETER (Detection of Deforestation in Real Time) satellite monitoring program.
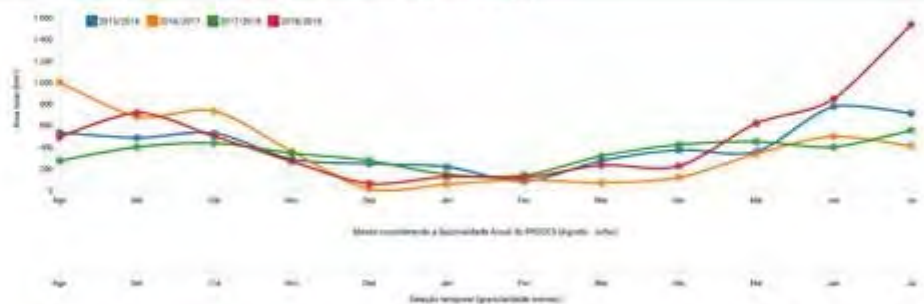
President Bolsonaro has repeatedly attacked INPE — the Brazilian agency in charge of tracking deforestation — especially since July 19th, when he stated at a breakfast with journalists: "Regarding the issue of INPE, I hold the conviction that the data are lies." Bolsonaro claims to be "surprised" by the great increase shown by the recent numbers and alleges that INPE's finding is inconsistent with

results from the first months of 2019. However, the differences are easily explained and do not invalidate the numbers that the president questions.

In three of the first four months of 2019, deforestation rates were lower than in 2018, but these months occur during Amazonia's rainy season when hardly any clearing takes place, making them essentially irrelevant to the annual total. Wide year-to-year variations in these months is normal, since variation in factors such as cloud cover (which is always great during the rainy season) can greatly influence the results.

TerraBrasilis | Variação da detecção de área do projeto DETER com granularidade mensal e sazonalidade anual do PRODES (Agosto a Julho).

Variação da detecção de área do projeto DETER com granularidade mensal e sazonalidade anual do PRODES (Agosto a Julho)

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Data from Inpe's Deter-B system show deforestation evolution, month by month, since 2015. The July value shown for 2019 is only for the deforestation in the first 15 days of the month and is already well above the historical series of values for the full month of July. Photo: Reproduction site Terrabrasilis / data INPE.

June, on the other hand, is the first full dry-season month to occur in President Bolsonaro's administration, and the great increase in clearing is both real and important. The result for May saw an increase of over 30 percent, providing a forewarning for June. Rather than being a "surprise," as the president claims, the June result confirms the many anecdotal accounts of deforestation behavior on the ground, including numerous invasions of indigenous reserves by loggers and miners, and it fits with the expectation of conservationists that the climate of impunity that the administration's rhetoric has promoted would lead to environmental crimes.

The alerts provided by the DETER monitoring system have been an important part of Brazil's deforestation control system in past years because they provide the locations of clearing activity in real-time, so that environmental authorities can stop the clearing, enforce laws and apply fines. However, in the current administration field inspections and the issuing of fines has been almost completely halted, and deforesters who are caught are, at most, simply

informed of the regulations they are violating. Although DETER results are an important tool for protecting the forest, they will not have that effect unless the administration changes its policies on the environment.

Amazon deforestation due to land conversion for cattle production in Mato Grosso state, Brazil. Image by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

The great jump in deforestation can be attributed to both the rhetoric and to the actual measures of the Bolsonaro administration. Other factors that could provide alternative explanations have not changed greatly, such as Brazil's (low) overall economic activity, the prices of soy and beef and the exchange rate of Brazilian currency against the US dollar.

The Amazon conservation outlook for the remainder of President Bolsonaro's four-year term is grim, as the administration has in only six months effectively dismantled Brazil's environmental agencies, deforestation control program and environmental licensing system. A paper published in *Environmental Conservation* on July 24th provides extensive documentation of these setbacks.

Skyrocketing deforestation looks bad for President Bolsonaro, who has a long record of contesting any scientific result that he views as inconvenient. Bolsonaro's denial of anthropogenic global warming is the best-known example, and, as in the case of US President Trump, this denial is an affront to all science, not only to those of us who study climate change. Bolsonaro's current attack on INPE for reporting inconvenient deforestation numbers is similarly an attack on all of Brazil's scientific institutions.

Banner Image: IBAMA environmental agency agents investigate illegal deforestation in Jamanxim National Forest in Pará state, Brazil.