

The Amazon fires are back and worse than ever, and it's not just climate change to blame

Last year, news of the Amazon fires dominated headlines for months. Roughly 310,000 acres of biodiverse forest land was destroyed across Brazil. The 20% increase in the total number of fires between 2018 and 2019 was record breaking, but depressingly, it seems that this season's fires will be significantly worse. Not just because of the climate crisis cliff-edge we're plunging off, but because of a number of other factors as well.

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We've spoken to tree-planters and forest fire fighters on the ground, and in their region they have already seen a significant increase in fire volume, of 30% compared to last year. Why? The climate crisis is one of the reasons, with dry land and high temperatures both at record levels, but this doesn't tell the whole picture.

Jair Bolsonaro's PR campaign against the worth of the natural world

Brazil's politicians have long had a problematic relationship with the Amazon. Despite some progress against deforestation a decade ago, since Jair Bolsonaro came into power the push for economic growth has been prioritised over protecting the rainforest.

Bolsonaro has been rolling back environmental protections and actively positioning the Amazon as an obstacle rather than a treasure. This is the

equivalent of the UK government campaigning to turn the lakes of the Lake District into giant car parks. Inevitably, the mindset of the people is changing, and the cultural significance of the Amazon to Brazilians is being watered down.

“Since the election of President Bolsonaro, fires throughout Brazil have increased. Not only in the Amazon. Our impression is that environmental criminals have become more free to commit their crimes.” - Cecilia Magaly Ruiz, Instituto Terra de Preservação Ambiental (ITPA)

We hear from our tree-planting partners in Brazil that NGOs in the region are suffering from reduced funding for restoration work, due to Bolsonaro’s policies. In addition, because of this top-down messaging that forests don't matter, there is less enforcement of forest protection, including the avoidance and management of burning.

There is a disastrous gap in responsibility - many farmers are not making any effort to stop purposefully-started agricultural fires from spreading onto nearby forest land. This was one of the most commonly reported causes of fires last year, and will likely continue again in 2020.

A perfect storm: Bolsonaro, COVID-19, an economic crash, and climate change

It was fully expected that we would see another devastating fire season in the Amazon this year. However, no one could have seen the pandemic coming. NGOs have been massively impacted by local lockdowns due to COVID-19, and have so far been unable to adequately prepare for the

coming fires.

Alongside this, the crashing economy, coupled with Bolsonaro's rollback of environmental funding, is pushing these NGOs to the verge of financial collapse. International and local funding has dried up, and many are having to make heavy job cuts to survive. This essentially means that the last frontier protecting the Amazon from the forest fires has disappeared.



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“With the government of Bolsonaro, these environmentally damaging practices become somewhat legitimised and more widespread, and efforts in reducing these fires only back-pedalled. They express how they do not struggle to find

support and funds aimed are restoration, and reforestation but few funding mechanisms allow for the support of fire brigades. Without the support for these brigades, reforestation initiatives in the area are simply futile.” - Cecilia Magaly Ruiz, Instituto Terra de Preservação Ambiental (ITPA)

Due to a lack of centralised support, restoration groups are not only reforesting but in some cases also taking on fire-fighting duties themselves. Ecosia tree-planting partners on the ground for example were able to plant 1.6 million trees in Brazil last year, and then saved an estimated 3 million through fire-fighting efforts.

The coronavirus, which is ravaging Brazil (106,000 deaths so far), has pulled a curtain over what is happening in the Amazon. Record dryness and high temperatures are being recorded, and the COVID storm has turned attention away from the climate bomb, which is just about to detonate in the Amazon.

Once these forests burn down, they will take decades, if not hundreds of years, to regrow. Despite other things going on in the world, we cannot lose focus on the ecological collapse happening in Brazil, and must double down on our efforts to protect this critically endangered region.

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