

WHO ARE THE DEFORESTATION CHAMPIONS?¹

Evaristo E. de Miranda²

Eight thousand years ago, Brazil had 9.8% of the world's forests. Today it holds 28.3%. Nowadays, less than 15.5 million square km are covered with pristine forests, about 24% of the 64 million square km that existed before the Human demographic and technological expansion. More than 75% of the world's forests have disappeared. Except the Americas, all other continents have cut down their forests and the total amount is not insignificant, according to EMBRAPA Satellite Monitoring Center on the World's Forest Evolution Research.

Europe alone, without Russia, once held more than 7% of the world's forests. Today there is only 0.1% left. In Africa once there were 11% and now, 3.4%. Asia had almost a quarter of the world's forested area (23.6%), now holds only 5.5%, and the deforestation hasn't stopped yet. On the other hand, South America once held 18.2% and now is responsible for 41.4% of the world's pristine forests. The major area within this percentage – a number that keeps growing every year – is among Brazilian borders.

Far from belonging to the past, this trend is still maintained. Brazil is already one of the countries that have destroyed the least its forests, and if the world's deforestation continues at the same ratio, it will hold, in the next future, almost half of all the primary forests in the world. The greatest paradox is that, instead of being recognized for its conservation history, for maintaining the pristine forest cover, Brazil is actually severely criticized by the deforestation champions deprived themselves from their own memory.

In most European, African and Asian countries, the Nature defense is a recent phenomenon. In Brazil, however, the forest preservation concern goes back a long way in the past. Since the 16th century, as soon as the Portuguese settlement began, laws were enforced by the appointment of the Kings Dom Manuel and Dom Felipe II (*Ordenações Manuelinas e Filipinas*), whom established rules and limits for the land, waters and vegetation exploration. In 1550, there was already a list of “royal trees” protected by the King's determination, originating the expression “law-timber”, still used in the present in Brazil to designate hardwood. The Brazilwood Bylaws, since 1600, stated the rules for the trees conservation, not land use alone. There were areas, by then, which were considered as

¹ Jornal O Estado de São Paulo, p. 2, S. Paulo, 16de janeiro de 2007.

² Doctor in Ecology, Embrapa Satellite Monitoring Center Director (mir@cnpm.embrapa.br)

“Crown Forest Reserves”. These land parcels couldn’t be destined to agriculture. This legislation granted the forests sustainable maintenance and exploration until 1875 when aniline was introduced in the world’s market³. The rational Brazilwood exploration preserved a good part of the Atlantic Forest until the 19th century end, and this wasn’t the deforestation cause, which occurred much later.

The same happened with the mangroves. In 1760 a royal permit signed by King Dom José I protected them. The municipal councils were notified and summoned to enforce the legislation. In 1797, a royal letters series credited the existing environmental legislation: all the forest on the coastal area or surrounding rivers that discharged immediately into the ocean, or any waterway that allowed barges transporting timber belonged to the Royal Portuguese Crown. Another important point in forests favor was the creation Judge of Conservation position, an authority who could enforce the penalties provided by the legislation. The penalties varied from fines, imprisonment, exile, and even capital punishment when there was criminal fires. At late 18th century, the Timber Harvest Bylaws was created, establishing severe rules for trees cutting as well as other restrictions to agriculture.

From the 17th to the 19th century, deforestation was limited to the coastal area. In 1808, King Dom João VI created the first conservation unit – The Rio de Janeiro Royal Botanical Gardens, with more than 2,500 hectares⁴. A Royal Decree from April, 09, 1809 gave freedom to any slave that denounced Brazilwood smugglers and a decree from August, 03, 1817 forbade the trees cutting in the areas surrounding the Carioca river spring. In 1830, after 300 years of Portuguese settlement, the total deforested area in Brazil was less than 30,000 square km⁵. Nowadays, more timber than that is cut down every two years.

In 1844, after a severe drought, Minister Almeida Torres proposed land expropriation and tree plantations to protect the Rio de Janeiro water reservoir areas. In 1854 and 1856, farms were expropriated by the Minister Couto Ferraz, so that the area was devoted to conservation. In 1861, Tijuca and Paineiras Forests were created and planted by the Imperial Decree 577 from His Majesty Dom Pedro II. The protected area until now surrounds the Corcovado Mountain where the Cristo Redentor monument is located.

³ MIRANDA, Evaristo Eduardo de . *Natureza, conservação e cultura*. Metalivros. São Paulo, 2002.

⁴ The Botanical Garden is today reduced to 137 hectares.

⁵ CASTRO, Carlos Ferreira de Abreu. *Gestão Florestal no Brasil Colônia*. UNB, Brasília, 2002.

The present environmental thought and criticism in Brazil is a centennial historic continuity, a unique intellectual tradition⁶. Through several mechanisms, the Portuguese and Brazilian Crown policy managed to keep the vegetation preserved until the 19th century end. Different from Europe, Asia, Africa and even North and Central America (under European colonization), the deforestation in Brazil is a 20th century phenomenon. In only 10 years, between 1985 and 1995, the Atlantic Forest lost more than one million hectares, more than all the area deforested during the Portuguese 322 year domain period. At São Paulo, Santa Catarina and Paraná States the march to the west brought great deforestation. The Araucaria Pine Forests were donated by the Republic to the British-American railway constructors, along with the surrounding areas (15 to 30 km each railway side).

In the Amazon Basin, for over four centuries, the Humankind presence was limited to indigenous settlements, small villages and cities around the river embankments, conditioned by the extracting activity. The Amazon occupation occurred during the late 20th century, including the migration, the population growth, the roads implementation, the hydro-electrical power plants building and other infrastructure facilities. In 30 years the deforestation rate varied from 15,000 to 20,000 square km with the highest rates – 29,000 and 26,000 – respectively in 1995 and 2003. This number decreased in the last two years, and now the rate is around 11,000 square km per year, according to INPE⁷.

Despite some misplaced generalization, in the Southern States as well as in the Amazonian States, the deforestation isn't necessarily producing deserts, like it happened in a few African areas. As in the European countries, the Brazilian primary forest also gave place to high technology agriculture, competitive cattle raising and even productive planted forests (rubber, coffee, cacao, teka...).

The EMBRAPA study indicates that despite the last 30 years' deforestation, Brazil still is where the primary forest coverage is mostly maintained. Considering the original forests as 100%, Africa today has only 7.8% left; Asia has 5.6%; Central America has 9.7% and Europe, the worst, has only 0.3%. Although it is worth mentioning that there is an effort in Europe to re-forest the land for tourism and commercial purposes, it's impossible to ignore the fact that 99.7% of the primary European forests were replaced by cities, farm lands and commercial farming.

⁶ PADUA, José Augusto. Um sopro de destruição, pensamento político e crítica ambiental no Brasil escravista (1786-1888). Zahar, Rio de Janeiro, 2002.

⁷ PRODES Project (<http://www.obt.inpe.br/prodes/index.html>).

The continent that has mostly retained its forests is South America: 54.8% still intact. Due to the fact that Brazil comprises 69,4% of the continent primary forests, the country certainly can count on its great expertise to deal with this theme, facing the deforestation champions' criticism. One also needs to take into consideration the effective historical management and exploration acts revival, through public policies and long term practices, once they have granted the primary forests preservation in Brazil.