

GUEST EDITORIAL

Amazonia Never to be Revisited?

We often used to hear it said that the Amazon rain-forests were 'timeless'. Belief in this statement was possible, probably, during the last and previous centuries. The early natural history explorers of the pre-Victorian, and even some in the Victorian, era — Humboldt, Bates, Wallace, Spruce, Martius, Schomburgh, Waterton, and others — were happy in this verdant environment in their sundry scientific pursuits. But that day has almost passed in many parts of Amazonia, with acculturation, disruption, or destruction, of huge regions for the building of dams, roads, and airports — without prior study by technical specialists, let alone the independent and unbiased environmental impact assessment that should precede the funding of all such major projects.*

There has also been unlimited invasion of vast areas of formerly pristine Amazonia by miners and other settlers from overpopulated cities, bringing to the local Amerindians diseases, and in some regions poisoning of the rivers with toxic mercury — killing 'natives' and the fish which make up a good part of the aborigines' diet. As if this were not enough, there is occasionally wholesale deportation of tribes from their traditional homelands — or, even worse, wanton slaughtering of 'natives'.

Explorers and travellers of today cannot think of many parts of Amazonia in terms of timelessness, as they are not far from the roar of the buzz-saw, the bulldozer, the blasts of dynamite, and the constant crashing of giant trees that are often centuries old.

With this precious wilderness disappearing 'before our eyes', with natural resources being ravaged on all sides, with whole races of Man disappearing from the hinterlands of the world, it behoves us to do much more than convoke thousands to 'discuss' a problem that the world knows exists, and to vote on and pass motions which will never be carried out. It is time for much more effective action — action that will require iron-handed international methods to control commercial and industrial greed. It is a world-important problem that will demand action above the wishes and activities of national governments which often are under the control of unscrupulous political machines.

When the pioneering British plant explorer, Richard Spruce, arrived in Manáos after spending five years almost incommunicado in the uppermost Rio Negro and its affluents, he was shocked to find the beginning of the rubber boom which had engulfed much of the parts of the Amazon where navigation was possible in those days. He wrote a letter to a correspondent in London, England, describing the situation: it was next to impossible to find a man for regular work in the cultivation of fields because so many had left their homes to cut rubber. The price of rubber had risen and commercialization had set in; money, the basic cause of today's destruction of forests, had its Latin American birth at that time in the Amazon.

Yet only six years earlier, when Spruce had first landed in Brazil, he expressed his wonder at what has been called the 'timeless forest': '... a forest which is practically unlimited — nearly three millions of square miles clad with trees and little else but trees, and where the natives themselves think no more of destroying the noblest trees, when they stand in their way, than we the vilest weeds; a single tree cut down makes no greater gap, and is no more missed, than when one pulls up a stalk of groundsel or a poppy in an English cornfield.'

Was not that rubber boom the beginning of the now rampant conditions that are threatening the very existence of the 'timeless' rain-forests of the world. Will our grandchildren and their descendants ever know what a timeless forest was?

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* See, for example, the Guest Comment by Antony L.T. McCammon, entitled 'The Need for Environmental Impact Assessment before Financing', published in our Spring issue of last year (*Environmental Conservation*, 19(1), pp. 6–7, 1992), and the following lead paper, by Dr Robert J.A. Goodland, entitled 'Environmental Priorities for Financing Institutions' (*ibid.*, pp. 9–22). — Ed.