

THE CHALLENGE OF THE AMAZON - INTRODUCTION

Social debate about the Amazon region takes two main approaches: One is critical, the other is admiring. The media are full of examples of this. And there are plenty of reasons for it. How can you deny the hard facts of deforestation? How can you keep from being fascinated by the region's biodiversity and culture? But the debate about the Amazon goes far beyond any such simplifications. Reducing it to one issue or the other is not constructive. The complexity of the debate defies simplifications, whether apocalyptic or romantic. Just consider the nature and the people of the Amazon: science and myth, the region's global and local dimensions. In fact, the different Amazons inside the Amazon itself are closely interconnected. Each could not survive without the other. Together, the different Amazons that we know and do not yet know should find their individual and at the same time common paths to follow.

No one is interested in what the forest will become, especially not those predators of the forest who come from all over the world, and not only from Latin America. Even mere preservation does not arouse any interest—not in the people who are blessed by living there and far less in those who are far from its reality. On the basis of my own experience of working with Brazil's historical and cultural heritage, I can say that the best way to preserve the environment is the sustainable and negotiated use of the territory. It is not possible that "natural" and "social" should still be incompatible, or that "economic" and "human" elements cannot work together.

Brazil now has a minister of environment who was born and raised in the Amazon and who is becoming a symbol of the region. Her name is Marina Silva. She belongs to a group of Amazonians who quickly learned a basic lesson about their territory: You can survive if the forest survives. Seringueiros, who live in the heart of the Amazon have a pragmatic idea of sustainable and negotiated use of their land, and it is not based on dreams or nightmares. The Amazon has brought the wisdom of the people from the forest to the government. It is no coincidence that the most relevant news about the Amazon is about these people's work.

Here's an example: On June 21, 2006 the Brazilian government created more than three areas for preservation in the Amazon, for a total of 1,800 hectares, located near the areas designated for deforestation. In these preservation areas, clear and negotiated rules of use will be in effect rather than a general ban that can easily be evaded, as it has been in the past. This latest measure brings the total of protected areas in the Amazon region to 19.3 million hectares. The idea is to circumscribe the areas designated for deforestation by creating legal protection and a barrier of local people involved in sustainable activities. There is a lot to do. And not only for the government to do. I have a suggestion for anyone who would like to know more about or do more for the Amazon: Put the simplifications behind you and get involved with the Amazon for real, first of all by trying to learn about and understand its complexity. Brazil and other developing countries need a new project for development and leadership in the globalized world. This new project should combine an increase in economic growth with fair distribution of profits, a better quality of life and improved access to public services. I think that one of the catalyzing features of the new project could be efforts to make the best and most sustainable use of the three greatest riches of the region: biodiversity, cultural variety and the abilities of the people themselves. In this sense, any agreement in favor of the sustainable development of the Amazon region is an agreement in favor of the sustainable development of Brazil and all of Latin America. Nature, culture and the people are the main resources of the Amazon, and they are the themes that are explored in this issue of COLORS.

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