

Deforestation of the Brazilian Cerrado

This factsheet describes the deforestation of the Brazilian savannah, known as the Cerrado, for the production of soy beans. The Cerrado is of high ecological and biological significance and performs important regional ecological functions such as maintaining water balance and climate regulation. In the past few decades, vast areas have been cleared for agricultural production, which is facilitated by the virtual absence of protected areas, monitoring and law enforcement.

The pressure on the Cerrado is increasing due to the growing demand for sugar cane for biofuel production and the moratorium on soy expansion in the Amazon. Serious measures are needed to be taken to reverse this trend and protect the unique Cerrado ecosystem and its inhabitants.

The Brazilian Cerrado

The Cerrado is regarded as the most biologically diverse woodland savanna in the world, with a large diversity of vegetation types (ranging from short grasslands to a variety of shrub- and woodlands to gallery forests), and exceptional numbers of birds and plants. The Cerrado is also home to a number of 'focal species' such as the maned wolf, the giant armadillo and the giant anteater. It is of major importance to the country's hydrology: most major rivers have their origin in the Cerrado and its soils and vegetation regulate the water balance, influencing the regional climate and creating rain.



Typical undisturbed scrubby Brazilian Cerrado. © AIDEnvironment

The Cerrado covers more than two million km² in the central Brazilian states of Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Goiás and Tocantins, and parts of Bahia, Maranhão, Minas Gerais, Piauí and São Paulo. Originally, the Cerrado was used for raising cattle on natural pastures, with some smallholder farming and extraction of fruits, honey, firewood and medicinal plants. Unfortunately, the Cerrado is one of the least-protected and least-monitored ecosystems in Brazil as only 1.5% lies within protected federal reserves, compared to 10% in Amazonian federal reserves.

Effects of deforestation of the Cerrado

At present more than half of Brazil's Cerrado has been converted to pastures and, to a lesser extent, agriculture for the production of commodities such as soy and biofuel crops. Since the 1970s and 1980s, the central and southern Cerrado states have been deforested, mostly for cattle ranches and soy bean production. Much of the northern Cerrado has been preserved because of inaccessibility and its extremely acidic and degradation-prone soils, but in recent years the northern Cerrados of the states of Maranhão, Piauí and Bahia have been deforested for cattle ranching and cultivation of agricultural commodities at an alarming rate. Local and indigenous communities rely on these areas for the extraction of fuel wood, fruits, medicinal plants and as grazing grounds. As many of them hold no formal land titles they are easily expelled.

Deforestation not only implies a major loss of the Cerrado's biodiversity, it also results in a significant release of carbon into the atmosphere. When the protective vegetation is removed through deforestation, the soil dries out and the organic matter decomposes, releasing the stored carbon. In addition, labour conditions analogous to slavery are frequently found in the Cerrado (see factsheet 2).



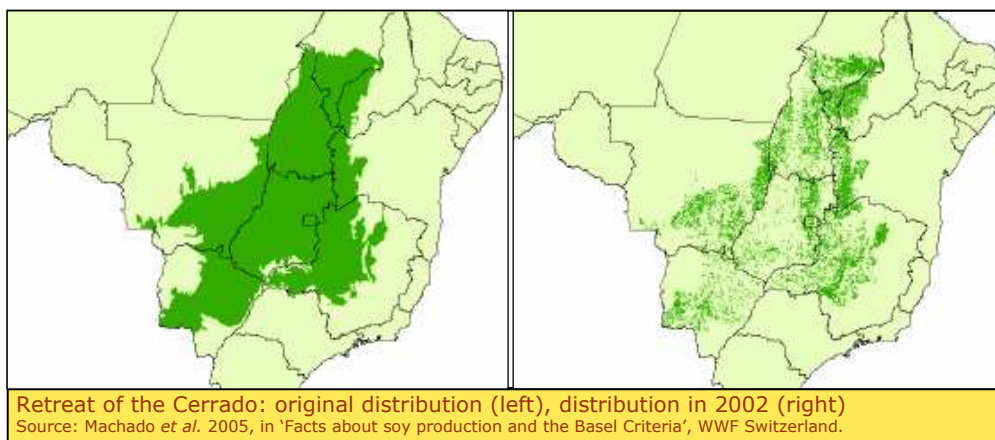
Deforestation of Cerrado by bulldozers pulling a steel chain in between them. © Ulrike Bickel

Besides direct deforestation for commodity production, the improved access through new roads also opens up new areas for agricultural development. Ranchers who have sold their lands to soy farmers move further into the forest, clearing areas for raising cattle.

The clearance of native vegetation without authorisation from the government has been forbidden by law since 1998 (Law 9,605/98), with punishments that vary from one to three years imprisonment and a fine. However, deforestation of "Areas of Permanent Preservation" still occurs and the requirement to preserve 20% to 35% of the area for Legal Reserves is not adhered to.

Statistics

There are very few official quantitative data available on Cerrado conversion. Deforestation estimates vary widely, from 39% (EMBRAPA, the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation, based on data of 2002) to 80% (Conservation International) of the total Cerrado. In comparison, the total deforestation of the Amazon is 18%.



Concrete numbers clearly show the harsh reality. The soy production area in the Cerrado states increased from 6.2 million hectares in 1995 to 14.6 million hectares in 2005. A further increase of deforestation is expected in the next years due to a growing demand for sugar cane for biofuels, and the moratorium on soy expansion in the Amazon forest.

International traders, Dutch companies and deforestation of the Cerrado

In November 2006, E. Dall Magro was charged with illegal deforestation by prosecutor T. Feitosa of the Federal Public Ministry of Piauí. Earlier, in 2004, the church-based Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) denounced Dall Magro for the "employment" of 21 labourers in conditions analogous to slavery. Dall Magro delivers soy to Bunge in Urucuí. In March 2008, the Brazilian Federal Tribunal cancelled Bunge's temporary permit to burn virgin Cerrado wood in its soy bean crushing plant. The use of this firewood has been condemned by NGOs since Bunge started operating in this area, and NGOs raised the issue with Dutch and international clients of Bunge in 2005. Nevertheless, there is no indication that Bunge has stopped supplying soy products from this plant to Dutch soy processors.

The Dutch Soy Coalition

The Dutch Soy Coalition brings together Dutch civil society organisations working in the fields of nature, environment and development. The coalition was founded in response to alerts by partner organisations in South America about the negative impacts of soy production and expansion. The Netherlands plays a central role in the soy sector as the second largest importer from South America and central distribution point for Western Europe. Therefore, the members of the Coalition see it as their responsibility to raise awareness with consumers and the media, and ask our government and companies to take steps to reduce the negative impacts of soy production and trade. Concrete suggestions of steps to be taken by companies and the government can be found in our publication "Big business, big responsibility: Addressing the social and environmental impact of the soy value chain", which is available through our website in English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese.

The factsheet and case study series has been developed to stress the urgency of the problems and the need to take action. They feature specific cases of social or environmental problems in particular soy producing countries. Should you wish to get in touch with the Dutch Soy Coalition or receive more background information on the issues, please contact the secretariat of the DSC at nsc@bothends.org or refer to our website <http://commodityplatform.org/wp>. An overview of the sources used for this factsheet is available on the DSC website ('Links and Documents' section).

