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**Brazil**

# Temer's Black Thumb

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**Brazil's right-wing interim government will set the country on a path of wholesale environmental destruction. Recently published transcripts of [conversations](#) between former Brazilian government planning minister Romero Jucá and former oil executive Sergio Machado prove that Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's recently deposed president, was right to insist that her impeachment was a parliamentary coup.**

The conspirators "a motley crew of congress members, businesspeople, and military commanders" wanted to protect themselves from the ongoing "Car Wash" corruption investigation. Now that they have gained control of the government they've quashed the formal inquiry and have begun to roll back social gains in Brazil.

These developments will have dire consequences for working people in Brazil. But the coup is dangerous for another reason. It will likely open the door to a wave of destructive environmental policies.

Home to 65 percent of the Amazon rainforest, Brazil is on the frontlines of the global battle against deforestation. [Satellite data reveal](#) that nearly six thousand square kilometers "an area seven times the size of New York City" of the Amazon were cut down or burned during the year ending in August 2015.

This represents a 16 percent increase from the previous year and the second deforestation acceleration in three years "a major setback in global conservation efforts. Brazilian scientists say that 57 percent of the Amazon's tree species will face extinction if current rates of land clearance continue.

Brazil's economic crisis has pushed desperately poor people to illegally log timber and clear land for cattle and crops. At the same time, the country's [powerful agricultural lobby](#) has long pressured the government to change the forestry code, to allow large infrastructure projects in the region, to cede control over the demarcation of indigenous reserves to congress, and to approve genetically modified "terminator" seeds.

The [Rousseff administration](#) also facilitated increasing deforestation by revising the forestry code in 2012, weakening Amazon protection and pardoning illegal deforesters, many of whom are large corporate farming and ranching interests.

Rousseff also approved a raft of infrastructure projects, including the controversial Belo Monte dam, the third largest on the planet. In January, a Brazilian federal judge [denied Belo Monte](#) an operating license until the government follows through on promises to mitigate the dam's environmental impact, which would inundate thousands of acres of rainforest and potentially displace twenty thousand people. Affected indigenous groups call the dam project a form of cultural genocide.

Under the Temer government these destructive changes to Brazil's environment are almost certain to accelerate. Temer has appointed Senator Blairo Maggi "a soy magnate who has cleared thousands of hectares in his home state of Mato Grosso" as agricultural minister. This is alarming to say the least.

Before the coup was even confirmed Maggi had [circulated a bill](#) that would allow major infrastructural projects to proceed before the completion of impact studies on biodiversity, indigenous areas, traditional communities, and conservation areas.

The bill also prevents government environmental protection agencies from halting infrastructure projects once they begin.

Meanwhile, the farmers' and ranchers' lobby presented their "positive agenda," which spells out the initiatives Maggi is likely to roll out, to Temer during the waning days of the Rousseff administration. Their demands include more funds for agribusiness "which already enjoys large subsidies" the abolition of the ministry of land reform, and the revision or elimination of indigenous reserve and *quilombos* demarcations.

Brazil's destructive environmental turn is doubly significant because it comes at a time when extinction rates in the plant kingdom are already accelerating at an alarming rate. According to [The State of the World's Plants](#), a new study from the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew in Britain, 20 percent of the world's estimated 391,000 wild plant species are threatened with extinction.

And in the last twenty-five years, [an area twice the size of Texas was deforested](#). This is not just an issue for people who like flowers: globally, deforestation accounts for about 15 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions "more than the total combined emissions of all the world's cars and trucks.

Remarkably, the Kew study is the first survey of global plant extinction rates. According to Kew's director of science Kathy Willis, "We already have a State of the World's . . . birds, sea-turtles, forests, cities, mothers, fathers, children, even antibiotics, but not plants."

Willis goes on, "this is remarkable given the importance of plants to all of our lives" from food, medicines, clothing, building materials and biofuels, to climate regulation."

According to the Kew report, the biggest factor threatening plant species is habitat destruction, which includes farming (30 percent) and deforestation for timber (20 percent) or construction materials (13 percent).

Climate change is currently a smaller contributor in plant extinction (4 percent), but it is certain to grow significantly. For example, rising temperatures are already making coffee beans more susceptible to disease and, in some cases, impossible to grow in key countries like Ethiopia.

But the news from the plant kingdom is not all bad. Approximately two thousand new species of plants are discovered every year, and, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization's [2015 Global Forest Resources Assessment](#), the global rate of deforestation has slowed over the last several decades.

"Attention paid to sustainable forest management has never been higher," the report concludes. "More land is designated as permanent forest, more measurement, monitoring, reporting, planning and stakeholder involvement is taking place, and the legal framework for sustaining forest management is nearly universal."

Nevertheless, key steps must be taken to protect the world's dwindling botanical diversity. Most important for the Kew study's authors is the identification of sites called Important Plant Areas (IPAs) "based on factors like threats to species or habitats and exceptional botanical richness" that are in particularly urgent need of conservation.

The world is only just beginning to catalog "let alone protect" these areas. There are currently sixteen countries in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East that have IPA designated areas.

Yet a quarter of European IPAs have no legal protection and no sustainable management plans. Many of these areas face imminent threats. Far worse, though, is the fact that there are no IPAs in tropical regions, which are of course the great hotspots of botanical biodiversity.

The destruction of tropical forests threatens the survival of many plant and animal species. The Kew report identified habitat degradation as the main threat to 85 percent of threatened plant species.

Further, according to [a recent report from the WWF](#), eleven of the world's most important forests "all of them in tropical zones" are set for catastrophic deforestation over the next two decades.

The Brazilian Amazon is foremost among these vital but threatened forests.

Brazilian social movements have long recognized the interplay between capitalism and environmental destruction. They will keep fighting to preserve the country's natural resources and will challenge the recent legal changes permitting accelerated deforestation. But this fight will be much more daunting in the face of the coming political onslaught and the dismantling of Brazil's social gains.

Outside Brazil the Left can draw attention to the global supply chains that bring trees, palm oil, and soy products from endangered tropical regions to markets like the US, and pressure multinational corporations like [Siemens](#) and [GE](#) to abandon infrastructure projects like the [Belo Monte dam](#) .

Now is the time to ramp up the fight against corporate attacks on the world's forests and the people who dwell in them.

[Jacobin](#)