

Road Construction in the Amazon

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Road Construction in the Amazon

When one thinks of the Amazonian rain forest, it is very unlikely that paved roads and highways will come to the imagination. Unfortunately, in the past 35 years road construction has been the main reason for the deforestation in Brazil's Amazon basin. In an effort to expand its frontiers and develop economically the impenetrable areas of the country, Brazil's government has launched a series of projects aimed at improving the infrastructure in the [Amazon](#) region. This included mainly the building of big transport arteries such as the Trans- Amazon highway and the subsidizing of small-scale farming along those arteries. The National Development Plans (NDP's) did not meet their initial goals since few people settled in the newly expanded areas and those who settled still suffered from low income, lack of educational opportunities and low life expectancy.¹

The negative impact on the environment of the planned human expansion is tremendous. It has been estimated that 10 million hectares of the Amazon forest have been destroyed due to clear-cutting, burning, slash-and-burn agriculture and conversion to pastures. Deforestation is caused mainly by road [construction](#) since 74% of the converted areas is within 50 km of roads.¹ This clearly shows that frontier expansion and colonization for

economical and social reasons has a devastating effect on the environment. The Brazilian Amazon is the largest piece of undisturbed rain forest and, unfortunately, this natural treasure is being damaged very carelessly and at an extremely high rate.

Despite the above grim conclusions, the Brazilian government persists in its effort to expand the infrastructure by appropriating more and more land from the heart of the Amazon [basin](#). In 1999, the government started a new program, called *Avança Brazil* (Forward Brazil), which intends to add 6,245 km of paved highways and 1,600 km of railroads to the existing transportation network. The highlights of the project include the construction of the Santarem-Cuiaba and Porto Velho-Manaus highways, which would traverse pristine forest areas.¹

There is a heated debate about the effects on the environment of the new construction project. Researchers and environmentalists predict that "Avança Brazil" will cause deforestation at a rate between 269,000 and 506,000 hectares per year. They also accuse the Brazilian government in negligence and corruption, because "Avança Brazil" was approved without the necessary environmental assessment reports from the Ministry of the Environment.² Government officials claim that measures have been taken to minimize the negative impact on the environment, but do not present facts and examples of how this is being done.

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