

CORONAVIRUS

Deforestation of the Amazon has soared under cover of the coronavirus

An NBC News analysis of satellite imagery captured by the European Space Agency shows areas where trees were recently taken down.





— Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro speaks with journalists at the Supreme Federal Court in Brasilia on May 7, 2020.

Adriano Machado / Reuters

May 11, 2020, 5:40 PM UTC

By Jamie Robertson and Lorand Bodo

Logging and mining operations have accelerated their destruction of sizable patches of the Amazon rainforest during the coronavirus pandemic, according to an NBC News analysis of satellite imagery captured by the European Space Agency.

Environmentalists, who have also warned about the deforestation, said the pandemic has provided cover for the operations, and they blamed Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for what they see as his tacit approval of the deforestation. In response to calls to protect the Amazon, Bolsonaro has sent armed forces.

"Government agencies are in quarantine, the population is in quarantine, good people are in quarantine – but the criminals are not, so they are taking advantage of this momentum to increase their activity," said André Guimarães, the head of Amazon Environmental Research Institute, a nonprofit organization that advocates for conservation of the rainforest.

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon soared by 55 percent in the first four months of the year compared to the same period last year, according to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research. Destruction in April was up by 64 percent from the same month a year ago.

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The analysis of the satellite imagery and data, conducted by NBC News' Verification Unit, found visual evidence of the deforestation efforts, showing a significant reduction in rainforest in the western state of Rondônia since the pandemic took hold.

Satellite photos reveal Amazon deforestation

Satellite images from Jan. 31 and April 25 show tree loss, highlighted in red rectangles, near Porto Velho, Brazil.



European Space Agency

Graphic: Robin Muccari / NBC News

Comparing images from Jan. 21 and April 25, there is a clear missing area of rainforest close to the state's capital city, Porto Velho. Each of the highlighted areas represents about 1 square mile, with a total loss of land measuring roughly 448 football fields.

The Brazilian Climate Observatory said the deforestation was conducted in a hot spot for illegal deforestation. NBC News could not confirm whether the deforestation found in the images was illegal.

As Brazil comes to terms with a mounting death toll and its status [as one of the new global centers](#) of the coronavirus struggle, efforts to combat deforestation have been complicated by a depleted workforce at its main environmental protection agency, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama), according to environmentalists and one of its former heads.

Increasingly plagued by criticism of his handling of the pandemic, as well as by ongoing corruption allegations, Bolsonaro has responded by deploying the armed forces [to protect the Amazon](#).

An aerial view shows a deforested plot of the Amazon near Porto Velho, Brazil, on Sept. 17, 2019. Bruno Kelly / Reuters file

Bolsonaro's critics, however, argue that his pro-development rhetoric and dismantling of Ibama through [budget cuts and the firings of key officials](#) since he took office in January 2019 have only fueled the desire of loggers, ranchers and miners to take advantage of the health crisis.

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"The storyline that the central government is sending out basically passes on a message that 'you're free to go, my friend, you can do whatever you want, and we're not going to bother you ...' that's definitely influencing deforestation," Guimarães added.

Suely Araujo, who resigned as head of Ibama last year in protest against Bolsonaro's attacks on the agency, detailed a culture of interference and harassment from the central government as she sounded the alarm at the latest move to transfer power over environmental operations in the Amazon to the military.

"Environmental inspection is much more sophisticated than putting men on the field," she said. "This decision by the president subordinates environmental agents to the army."

Amazon deforestation at all-time high amid COVID-19 crisis

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The Brazilian government did not respond to a request for an interview. The Bolsonaro administration has [previously rejected](#) criticism of its environmental record, insisting it is committed to conservation.

Sarah Shenker, a researcher for Survival International, an organization that campaigns for the rights of indigenous people, said she and her colleagues are "receiving messages every day" from communities in the Amazon living in fear of the twin threats of the coronavirus: infection and invasion.

"The invaders are thinking that they can get away with these invasions with impunity even more than they could before, because the eyes of the world and others are on the coronavirus," she said. "That's something that indigenous peoples are really trying to fight hard against at the moment."

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The situation could soon deteriorate further, with a pandemic-induced recession potentially providing incentives for deforestation and the Bolsonaro administration still trying to push new laws through Congress, which environmentalists say would weaken safeguards against the incursion into indigenous lands.

Activists are also fearful of the imminent fire season – predicted to be even more devastating than last year's because of rampant deforestation – and the impact on a health care system already overwhelmed by the coronavirus.

Reflecting on what he described as the "perfect storm" of environmental, health and political threats looming over the Amazon, Guimarães said: "It was urgent last year. This year is urgent multiplied by sevenfold. We have to stop the deforestation in the Amazon now. Now. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Not the day after tomorrow. Now." 🦋

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