



Last stand

Our last ancient forests are under assault. WAYNE ELLWOOD explains what is driving this devastation and why we need to save the trees.

From the air, the earth is shorn and desiccated.

Waves of heat billow upward, mixed with plumes of smoke. A few lonely trees stand in relief against the flattened landscape, while knots of cattle clump together in dusty paddocks ringed by barbed wire. This is the Brazilian state of Rondônia, the heart of the Amazon, wedged between the vast state of Amazonas to the north and, due south, Bolivia.

Fifty years ago, Rondônia was swathed in dense tropical rainforest. Today, it is one of the most deforested parts of the Brazilian Amazon. An astonishing 100,000 square kilometres of forest has vanished from the state since 1978. Poor people from the crowded coastal areas, attracted by land and opportunity, flocked here in the 1970s when roads began to penetrate the forest. First came loggers, who harvested the valuable tropical hardwoods; then settlers, who cleared the remaining trees to plant maize and soy; and finally large landowners, who

consolidated the land to graze cattle. Two-thirds of Brazil's deforested land is used for cattle ranching.¹

But let's leave the Amazon for a moment and shift our focus more than 3,000 kilometres southeast to the sprawling megalopolis of São Paulo, home to more than 20 million people. São Paulo is Brazil's economic powerhouse: chaotic, pulsing with life and a little intimidating.

Severe drought

But *Paulistas*, as the city's citizens are known, have a problem – a big one. São Paulo is drying up. In fact, much of southeast Brazil is suffering, including the country's second-biggest city, Rio de Janeiro. The region has had three consecutive years of drought. Despite recent El Niño-influenced downpours, São Paulo's reservoirs are nearly empty. Last year, the Cantareira Reservoir, which supplies nine million people, was operating at just five-per-cent capacity.²

Weapons of mass destruction: loggers harvest precious tropical hardwoods in Brazil. The South American nation is losing more than half a million hectares of rainforest every year.

BrazilPhotos.com/Alamy