

# Cattle, not coca, drive deforestation of the Amazon in Colombia – report

**Authorities have blamed the growing of coca – the base ingredient of cocaine – for clearcutting, but a recent study shows otherwise**

***Luke Taylor in Bogotá***

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An illegal road made during deforestation in Caquetá, Colombia, in 2021. Photograph: Luisa González/Reuters

Cattle-ranching, not cocaine, has driven the destruction of the Colombian Amazon over the last four decades, **a new study** has found.

Successive recent governments have used environmental concerns to justify ramping up their war on the green shrub, but the research shows that in 2018 the amount of forest cleared to cultivate coca, the base ingredient of cocaine, was only 1/60th of that used for cattle.



### A third of companies linked to deforestation have no policy to end it

The study's findings vindicate conservation experts who have long argued that Colombia's strategy to conserve the Amazon – often centered on combating coca production – has been misplaced.

“We want to finally eradicate **this narrative that coca is the driver of deforestation,**” said Paulo Murillo-Sandoval at the University of Tolima, who led the study.

Deforestation spiked after the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) signed a landmark peace agreement with the government in 2016 and laid down their weapons.

As the rebels came out of the jungle, **land-grabbers took advantage,** clearing trees with chainsaws and burning vast areas. Deforestation reached a record high of 219,973 hectares (543,565 acres) in 2017, up 23% from the previous year.

Then president Iván Duque **used the environmental destruction caused by coca cultivation** to justify stepping up military action against coca farmers. Prohibited from spraying coca crops with glyphosate after the chemical was **banned in 2015** for health concerns, the Duque government sent in

choppers and armed troops into the Amazon rainforest, sometimes into deadly confrontations with coca farmers.

Yet while cattle ranches cleared more than 3m hectares (7.4m acres) of **Amazon rainforest** in 2018, coca's impact was negligible.



Cattle roam the deforested Amazon in Guaviare, Colombia, in 2022. Photograph: Mauricio Dueñas Castañeda/EPA

Only 45,000 hectares (111,200 acres) were cleared for coca in 2018, the latest year available in the study.

Using a deep learning algorithm to differentiate between land used for coca and cattle, Murillo and his colleagues were for the first time able to distinguish between the activities on a mass scale from 1985 to 2019.

“We have always contested the government’s argument that coca was driving deforestation but lacked the evidence,” said Angelica Rojas, liaison officer for Guaviare state at the Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development, a Colombian environmental thinktank. “Now we have real data with which we can oppose this mistake.”

The figures show that previous governments have used the environment as a false justification to wage war on coca farmers, said Rojas, who was not involved in the study.

“They didn’t want to prevent deforestation, they just wanted to justify spending more money and resources on their real political goal: eliminating coca,” she said.

The study also adds to evidence that despite lives being sacrificed and billions of dollars being spent, Colombia’s “war on drugs” has failed to halt coca production – and in some cases it may have even made it worse.

When farmers have their crops eradicated they simply establish new plots, often just a few kilometres deeper into the forest canopy, Murillo said. “The war on drugs started 40 years ago now, yet everyone knows where coca is: in the same place they have always been.”

As the government has engaged in a game of whack-a-mole with coca farmers, the real driver of deforestation, cattle farming, has been allowed to swallow up vast swathes of land, the authors argue.

Flaws in Colombian land regulation have incentivised the conversion of biodiverse tropical rainforests into barren pastures.

To get their deeds recognised, landowners must demonstrate that 75% of their plots are productive, and it is far easier for farmers to use cows than crops, said Carlos Devia, a forest engineer at Bogotá’s Javeriana University who was not involved in the study.

“Ranching is the easiest way to show you’re using land, as it’s unregulated. You could have 100 hectares of land and just throw 10 cows in there, whereas for potatoes or corn only a hectare would require a year of great work,” Devia said.

Landless farmers often clear a few hectares of rainforest and sell them illegally to members of criminal organisations who then join up multiple small lots, transforming them into vast swathes of lifeless, arid pasture.

Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who took office in August last year, is proposing a U-turn on **Colombia's** failed anti-narcotics strategy.

Petro, a former member of the defunct M-19 rebel group, has **turned the focus away** from forced coca eradication, and is buying up millions of hectares of land to give to farmers.

“Reducing drug use does not require wars, it needs us all to build a better society,” **Petro told the UN general assembly** in September last year.