



THE AMAZON, UNDONE

DEFORESTERS ARE
PLUNDERING THE
AMAZON. BRAZIL IS
LETTING THEM GET
AWAY WITH IT.

A FAILURE OF ENFORCEMENT

Deforesters are plundering the Amazon. Brazil is letting them get away with it.

Story by [Terrence McCoy](#)

Photos by Rafael Vilela for The Washington Post

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BRASILÉIA, Brazil — Daniel Valle sped down Highway 317, closing in on the first targets of the day. He was in a hurry. Deforestation alerts had tripled in recent weeks. Police were warning that armed criminal groups had invaded new territory. Another season of destroying the Amazon rainforest was here, and in this corner, the only check on the looming ecological disaster was this: Valle's small team of inspectors in a dirt-splattered pickup truck.

The Amazon, Undone

A series revealing how crime, corruption and greed are speeding the destruction of the world's largest rainforest.

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How deforestation is pushing the Amazon toward a tipping point

“This is it,” said Valle, 39, pulling off the highway. A roving state environmental inspector, he traveled throughout this remote land that was increasingly under threat from a wave of destruction that had leveled the forests to the east. His job was to slow its advance. The challenge felt futile most days. But especially today.

His crew was in southern Acre, where the federal government under President Jair Bolsonaro — a longtime critic of environmental regulation — no longer staffed a single inspector. That meant his state agency, the Acre Environmental Institute, now bore the burden of enforcing environmental law in this area of more than 3,600 square miles along the border with Bolivia.

Valle pulled out his target list. The map showed 16 points of illegal devastation — pinpricks of red piercing an expanse of green and brown.

He sighed. This was enough work for two weeks. Not the two days they'd been given.

“We don't have enough people,” Valle said.



Daniel Valle, an inspector with the Acre Environmental Institute, examines a truckload of logs on July 14. The logs have a stamp that supposedly proves their legality by showing they were cut under a management plan.

This mismatch — too few inspectors for too much deforestation — is one of a cascading series of shortfalls and failures that are enabling criminals to raze the world’s largest rainforest with impunity. Law enforcement misses the majority of deforestation in the Amazon. The fines that the few state and federal inspectors here write are seldom paid. The occasional cases that spill into the criminal justice system languish for years. And in the rare instance of a criminal conviction, it almost never draws a prison sentence, The Washington Post found in a review of a year’s worth of cases.

The violent and lawless erasure of the Amazon is perhaps the world’s greatest environmental crime story. Scientists warn that the forest, seen as vital to

averting catastrophic global warming, is at a tipping point. But in Brazil, home to about 60 percent of the Amazon, nearly one-fifth has already been destroyed. And virtually no one, law enforcement officials say, has been held accountable.

“No one goes to jail,” said Luciano Evaristo, former chief inspection officer of Ibama, the federal environmental law enforcement agency. “For example, in 2016, we took apart a large deforestation ring in the south of Pará state. They deforested 50 square miles. There were 23 arrests. In the end, no one’s in jail. And this was the biggest deforestation ring in Brazil.”

Environmental agencies have similarly struggled to punish even those accused of only minor deforestation — such as the man the inspection team was driving to visit. At the end of the path, they found rancher Francisco Nonato de Souza coming out of his house. They accused him of illegally deforesting 45 acres and handed him a \$17,000 fine. Nonato glowered. He looked at the crew’s heavily armed police escort.

“You come out here for this bit of deforestation but do nothing about the guys who deforest 120 or 150 acres?” he said. “Those guys over there” — his chin jutting into the distance — “they knocked it all down. Burned it. Planted grass. Nothing happened to them.”

Valle defended their work. Nonato was the first on their list in southern Acre. But they still had 15 cases to investigate.

The rancher was unmoved.

“They knock it all down,” he said. “And nothing happens.”

Valle didn't reply; he knew environmental authorities were about to fall even further behind. His was the only inspection team that traveled throughout the state. The year was shaping up to be perfect for deforestation: hot and dry. And the last agent to perform inspections from the south Acre field office, disillusioned by the mission and tired of the risks it entailed, had just announced he was quitting. So when tomorrow came, and Valle's crew departed for another part of the state, they'd be leaving the forest here defenseless.

More than 3,600 square miles. And no one to enforce the environmental law.



Deforestation on private property in the interior of the state of Acre. The location was determined by satellite images and later verified in an on-site inspection by the Acre institute.

THE FOREST BURNS. FEW PAY.

Brazil had once promised something different. Rising from the yoke of a military dictatorship that had promoted rapacious development of the Amazon, the country vowed a radical new approach to the environment. The 1988 constitution described the environment as “essential” and called upon the government and civil society to safeguard it. Soon came official plans to crack down on deforesters, and the law enforcement agencies to do it.

The tools: Fines that could soar into the millions. Land-use embargoes that prohibited the commercial use of illegally deforested or degraded land. Criminal charges that could put deforesters in prison.

“A revolution” is how former environment minister Marina Silva described it in an interview. But in the decades since, law enforcement officials say, nearly every tool has been dulled to the point of ineffectiveness, snagged by bureaucracy, case overloads and a grinding appellate system that has long stymied the country’s criminal justice system. The atrophy has deprived Brazil of what should be its most potent weapons against deforestation: credible regulations and the threat of consequences for those who violate them.

“It’s the economic theory of crime,” said Jair Schmidt, a government environmental analyst who studies law enforcement failings. “Will you make more money from deforestation than you stand to lose if you are cited for an infraction?”

In the beginning, the answer was unclear. Ibama, the country’s chief environmental enforcement agency, was founded in 1989 and professionalized with a civil service exam in 2002. It would be years before it was writing more than 10,000 citations a year. Then years more before deforesters knew how seriously to take them. Between 2004 and 2012, according to government data, deforestation fell 83 percent.

But there was a hidden flaw: As the number of citations rose, the number of people charged with adjudicating them didn't. The backlog swelled. Thousands of cases languished, some for as long as 15 years. At least 28,100 fines issued since 2000 have expired, government records show, because of the statute of limitations. Between 10 and 15 percent of fines are paid. But they are the smallest ones, law enforcement officials say, for the pettiest abuses. Less than 1 percent of the money owed for environmental abuse is generally paid, according to government audits.



The office of Ibama, the federal environmental law enforcement agency, in Humaitá, Amazonas state, in late 2021, a few years after it was attacked and set on fire by miners whose machines had been seized and destroyed. (Raphael Alves/for The Washington Post)

“Infractions aren’t generating the dissuasive effect that they should have,” Ibama officials reported this

year in an internal technical note obtained by The Post. “Offenders think it’s worth it to continue with their undue use of natural resources and that the risk of timely punishment is low.”

Ibama didn’t respond to requests for comment.

In the federal criminal justice system, which adjudicates more-serious allegations of environmental abuse, the risk of punishment is just as slight.

“What you saw in your analysis is what we see every day,” said Daniel Azeredo, a federal attorney who has led some of the government’s largest prosecutions of accused deforesters. “We don’t have people in prison for environmental crimes. What we do have is a trade. We are trading massive areas of the Amazon for very small punitive penalties.”

Offenders enjoy several advantages in the court system. Crimes of deforestation are limited to maximum sentences of four years. The appellate system effectively freezes cases. And the legal resources at the command of deforesters are enormous — many hire expensive defense attorneys now specialized in environmental law.

Prosecutors named grocery store owner Ezequiel Antônio Castanha the “Amazon’s biggest deforester” in 2014 and won a conviction in 2019. But Castanha was not sent to prison. (Prosecutors are appealing. Castanha declined to comment.) Federal attorneys called São Paulo businessman A.J. Vilela the same

thing in 2016. But his case is still pending. (Vilela didn't respond to requests for comment. He has denied any wrongdoing.) José Lopes, one of the Amazon's biggest farmers, was accused by federal attorneys in 2019 of forming a militia to invade public lands and conduct "large-scale deforestation," but never convicted. (Lopes contested the charges. Citing a lack of evidence, prosecutors have requested a dismissal.)

In the Amazon, nearly 95,000 people were incarcerated as of December. But only one-tenth of 1 percent of them were being held for an environmental crime, according to the National Prison Department. There isn't a state in the Brazilian Amazon that doesn't face illegal deforestation, but in some, not one person was incarcerated for environmental abuse.

One such state was Acre, where a state environmental agent named Marcel Pedralino had decided to call it quits.



Marcel Pedralino, 39, a sanitary and environmental engineer, worked for the Acre institute in its Brasília office.

‘I’M NO MARTYR’

At the field office of the Acre Environmental Institute, the requests had been piling up for weeks. One was from a local judge, asking for verification that a ranch was respecting a land embargo. Another came from a judicial official wanting a deforestation investigation on 45 remote acres. And in the back of the sleepy office, one more request now sat on Pedralino’s desk.

Pedralino, the last person in the office who investigated such infractions, squinted at the page. “Damage to the forest,” a colleague had written. “Uncontrolled fire.”

He looked around. Shuffled some files.

“Where is that stack of papers?” Pedralino asked.

He opened the cupboard behind him and pulled out a beige envelope. It was stuffed with all the complaints of deforestation that had never been investigated.

There were dozens: “They burned all of the vegetation protecting the creek,” one reported.

“Seventy acres already destroyed by fire,” another said. “Illegal extraction of wood,” added a third.

Pedralino put the additional report on the top. He closed the folder and placed it back in the filing cabinet.

He was done. His paperwork was signed, delivered and approved. He no longer worked here. He now was employed by the state sanitation service, a prospect he found far more enticing than defending the Amazon. No one gets killed tinkering with sewer systems.

“I’m no martyr,” he said. He wasn’t even an environmentalist. He of all people, he believed, didn’t deserve to go down like the cop ambushed and killed in 2016 after an environmental bust in Pará state. Or the government worker shot dead in 2019 while investigating illegal fishing in Amazonas. He didn’t want to be attacked like the Ibama agents who came under fire in 2020 in Roraima state and to not have a way to respond. The agency didn’t give him a gun. It didn’t provide a bulletproof vest. He didn’t even have

a car. The office truck had been in the shop for weeks. No one knew when they were getting it back. Pedralino glanced to his right. Elaine da Silva was typing at her computer. She was also authorized to perform inspections, but had never done one in the region and had no plans to. Not without an armed escort, which police almost never provided to the field office, unlike for Valle's team of inspectors. No environmental offender, she believed, would listen to her, a Black woman, anyway.



Pedralino meets with landowners seeking regulation of their land, at the institute's office in Brasília.

So here they sat, gunless, carless, with 3,600 square miles to patrol and limited resources to do it.

“Give me a hand with this property registry,” da Silva told Pedralino, dropping a form on his desk. With no other work to do, he gave it a look.

It hadn't always been like this. When Pedralino joined the agency in 2012, the government had seemed on the cusp of eliminating illegal deforestation. Each federal and state environmental agency staffed an inspection force. Pedralino would travel down distant roads, hand out the tickets and be on his way, free of concern for his safety.

But that was before the election of Bolsonaro. Before Bolsonaro's environmental minister met with gold miners, loggers and land grabbers. Before the number of Ibama inspectors plummeted. Before Acre's conservative new governor told accused environmental offenders not to pay fines issued by state inspectors. Before the rise of a politics of grievance that presented deforesters not as criminals, but as honest workers oppressed by authoritarian environmentalists. And before Pedralino realized that this job, a job for which he felt no personal affinity, was putting his life at risk.

He had always considered himself willing to do whatever was necessary to perform his work. But now, when asked to investigate deforestation, all he could see was the violence that might happen. He remembered when dozens of angry ranchers, some of them armed, surrounded his truck in 2013. He thought about the illegal logger who went to get

something from his house, and Pedralino was sure it was a gun. He heard his own pleas, begging visiting environmental agents in 2019 not to destroy the logging equipment they'd confiscated — because that could trigger retaliation, and he was the one who lived here and would have to suffer the consequences.

The stress got to be too much. So late last year, Pedralino complained to his bosses that it was nearly impossible to investigate environmental wrongdoing without security. Then in early July, with nothing having changed, he told them he was quitting. And now it was a week later, and he was standing up from his desk, not feeling a bit of regret.

There was only one matter that caused him remorse: the thought that other inspectors were out there now, patrolling territory he refused to go into, taking on risks he could no longer stomach.

“That’s the hardest thing to face,” he said, “But, maybe it will prolong my life.”



Dust fills the air in the wake of a car driven by environmental inspectors in July, one of the driest months of the year. The area around the road used to be rainforest.

FIGHTING THE FUTURE

Sixteen points of deforestation on the map. One now done. Fifteen to go.

Daniel Valle pulled out his target map, feeling a swell of annoyance. The phone he held was his own. The mapping app he used to locate the deforestation was a free promo. The Acre Environmental Institute hadn't even provided the targets. They came from the state police.

Every shortfall cost time. Not having a mobile printer meant losing 30 minutes writing fines by hand.

Having no access to property records meant personally pinpointing on which ranch the deforestation had occurred. Too few inspectors meant they had to drive hours just to reach their targets.

Sometimes during those long drives, they got to thinking that their challenges had been imposed intentionally, that they weren't employed to fight deforestation but to provide political cover. So that Acre could say it was combating deforestation when really it wasn't.

"We're pushing with our bellies," fellow inspector Josmario Santos Guimarães said during one such conversation, using a Brazilian expression that means not doing much of anything.

"The agencies have been shrunk so much," lead inspector Ivan de Jesus Pereira de Araújo e Silva said during another.

Valle looked up from his map. He grabbed the wheel. "We'll take advantage of our current location," he said. "This next point is close to our last inspection."



Inspectors Josmario Santos Guimarães, far left, and Ivan de Jesus Pereira de Araújo e Silva write up an environmental fine and land-use embargo in the interior of Acre.

It was easy to get frustrated, but Valle couldn't picture himself doing any other work. Raised on a rural commune, he'd always felt connected to the forest. He remembered the cool Amazon mornings of his childhood — “cold enough to kill a monkey,” his grandmother would say — and his fear when he learned that not only was the biome in danger but that its demise could threaten the world.

He decided there could be no better way to spend his life than defending something so important. But over the years, as more of the forest disappeared, and temperatures rose, and mornings cold enough to kill monkeys grew rarer, the idealism with which he'd entered the profession was infected by cynicism.

Most days, he didn't feel like he was fighting deforestation. He was fighting the future. They passed dirt roads branching off the highway. Each of these, he believed, was opening more territory to illegal deforestation. Some days, he'd find illegal loggers mowing away with their chain saws. Other days, blackened embers smoking from a recent blaze, or trucks laboring under the weight of giant logs. But every day, he'd hear the same story. Deforesters saying they'd done it to survive, to feed their families.

Was it the truth? Maybe for some. Not for others. And he was about to hear it again.

The inspectors were arriving at a 500-acre cattle ranch. An unshaven Mârcio Silva de Melo, 41, had been accused of hacking down 20 acres of forest. The cattleman looked down at his muddy boots. He said he'd done it to widen his pasture. He wanted more money to support his two daughters, ages 14 and 3. He felt embittered. First the government had left him without support out here, he said. Now it wanted to fine him \$8,000 for doing what was necessary to survive. That money, he said, would "come out of the mouths of my daughters."

Valle listened, relieved there was no violence in the man's voice. No one knew whether accused deforesters were armed, or how they would react. The inspectors took what precautions they could — never work alone, take security escorts, treat

everyone with respect — but still, the job had become more dangerous. Just the other week, his crew had inspected a farm occupied by a man convicted of organizing the murder of a female American missionary in 2005. They now relied on police to tell them where it was safe to go — and where their presence would bring trouble.

Hoping that the next stop wouldn't, they plunged deeper into the forest. The path led toward a huge ranching complex ringed by illegal deforestation. A dozen men emerged from the shadows of a building. No one said anything for a long moment. "Let the police get out first," Valle said.

Property owner Luiz Ricardo Fernandez Leon, 56, came out to greet the inspectors, uncertain and unsmiling. Valle walked with him to the shaded porch of a farmhouse, where he said they'd discovered more than 200 acres of illegal deforestation on his property. As the rancher's men watched, Fernandez Leon was handed several documents: a fine of \$80,000 and an embargo prohibiting him from using the deforested land to grow crops, graze cattle or any other moneymaking activity.

The rancher shook his head and rubbed his eyes. He didn't deny the destruction, but said he would fight the enforcement. Not with force — with lawyers. He planned to appeal the case. It would almost certainly be years before the matter was settled. If it ever was.

“I was not expecting this,” Fernandez Leon said.

“Five years we’ve been out here, and I’ve never seen one government inspector.”

Valle knew it was unlikely he’d ever see another.

He got back into the truck. A long drive loomed, and the crew had to get moving. Their next destination was along the far eastern tip of the state. Their work here was done.

Sixteen points of deforestation. They’d worked two days, and hadn’t even visited half.



Cleared land on Fernandez Leon's property. The location was identified by satellite imagery and later verified by the Acre institute.

A DREAM OF CONSERVATION UNDONE

Back in the office, a phone on Pedralino's desk was vibrating.

He grimaced and picked it up. "It's me."

The woman on the other end sounded frantic.

Headquarters needed someone to drive into the field and lift an environmental embargo. Could Pedralino go on Monday? He was already shaking his head.

"We don't even have a car," he said.

"What?" she said.

"Why don't you send an email?" he said. "I don't work here anymore. I now work in sanitation."

"You work in sanitation?"

He suggested a solution, hung up and went back to his computer. He pulled up Google Earth. He zoomed in to show his house, a property surrounded by forest on all sides. "How I like it," he said. Then he zoomed back out again.

The screen showed the states of Acre and neighboring Rondônia, side by side, each showing a different side of the debate over the future of the Amazon. Two of the last Brazilian states to be

incorporated, they once mirrored one another: remote, forested jurisdictions of similar size and economic power.

Then their paths diverged. Acre, reeling from the 1988 assassination of conservationist Chico Mendes, chose to preserve the environment. It built a sustainable economy around ecological reserves, rubber-tapping and the harvesting of nuts.

Rondônia, meanwhile, opened itself up to the cattle industry. Land grabbers stole territories. Armed disputes erupted. In a matter of decades, the state lost nearly 40 percent of its forest.



Pedralino assists Leandro Inacio Oliveira, 33, the new chief of the Acre Environmental Institute, with bureaucratic tasks at the office in Brasília on July 15.

Today, Rondônia has twice as many people as Acre, three times the economic output and nearly four

times as many cars. And its neighbors in Acre, increasingly critical of the conservation efforts their state once championed, want to catch up. In 2018, Acre awarded Bolsonaro 77 percent of its vote — more than any other state. Voters that year also elected a conservative new governor, Gladson Cameli, who has worked to realize Bolsonaro’s vision, growing the cattle industry and deprioritizing conservation.

Critics have lamented what they call the “Rondonization of Acre.” But few doubt that Bolsonaro will win again here in the October elections.

Pedralino zoomed in on Rondônia. The screen showed vast stretches of deforestation. He wanted to believe his 3-year-old daughter would know the Amazon as he had — gargantuan and pristine. But he started to doubt himself. All of this destruction had happened in just his lifetime. “A forest lost in a generation,” he said.

He returned the view to Acre. An expanse of uninterrupted green.

“Could it be possible,” he wondered aloud, “that what happened in Rondônia will now happen here?”

The screen swept toward the eastern tip of the state, where armed land invaders were increasingly aggressive, and where, on the ground, it looked to Valle as if the question was already being answered. He was standing in the forest, looking at a

scattering of colossal logs. The inspectors had been sent to try to remove them, but had no idea how.

“We’re not going to be able to solve anything here,” one of the inspectors vented, before they left for the next point of deforestation, and the next.

Pedralino closed Google Earth.

He stood up from his desk. He gathered his things and headed to the door. Whether Acre became the next Rondônia or not was no longer his problem. The Amazon would have to find itself a different martyr.

He walked outside, into the bright afternoon sun, put on his motorcycle helmet and rode off.

Gabriela Sá Pessoa and Luiz Fernando Toledo contributed to this report.

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