

Amazon's road to ruin: highway threatens heart of the rainforest

Efforts to stop upgrade of BR-319 are faltering amid pressure from rightwing governors and senators

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- An unpaved stretch of the BR-319, between Humaitá and Porto Realidade. Photograph: Alberto César Araújo/Amazônia Real

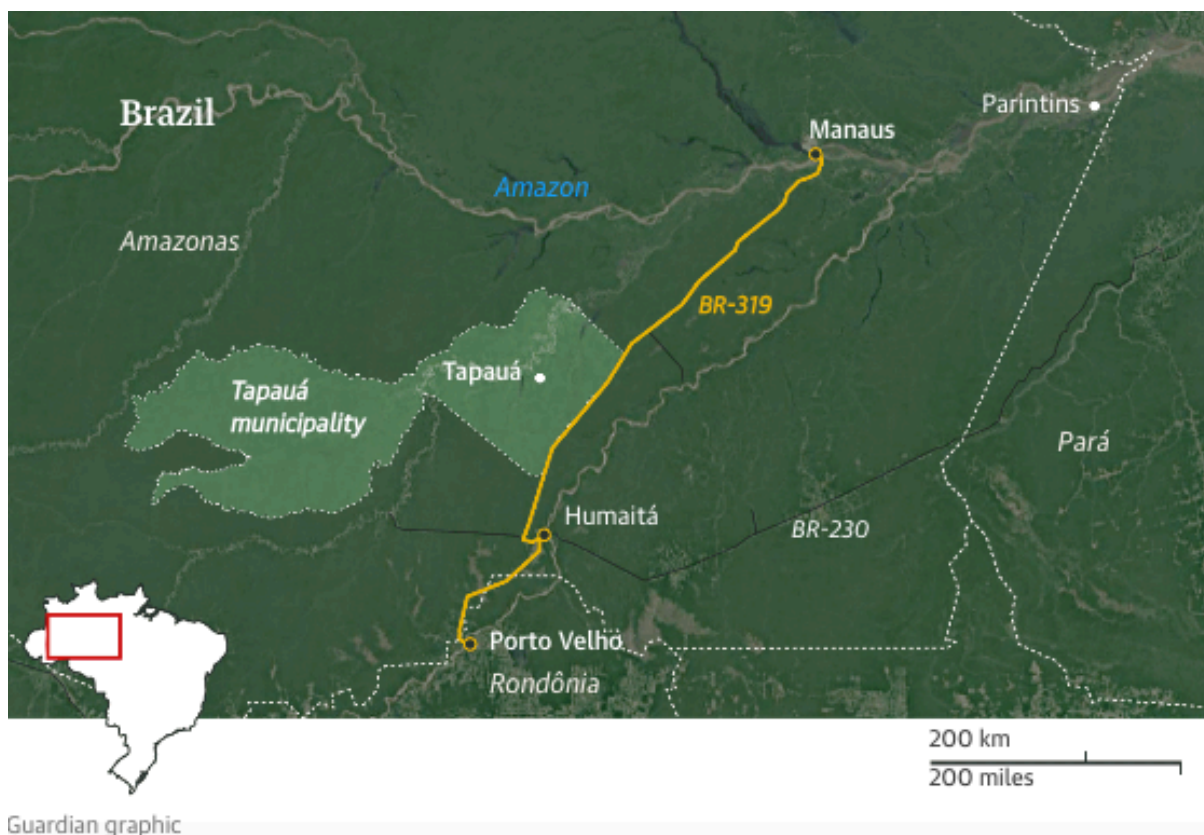
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hen a new road pierces the **Amazon rainforest**, it creates what is known as the fishbone effect. First comes the spine, which is a highway opened up by bulldozers, asphalters and pavers. Soon after follow the ribs, the spur roads on

either side that are carved out – often illegally – by land-grabbers, loggers, miners and farmers. From a satellite or plane, the end result resembles the skeleton of a herring with all of the surrounding vegetation steadily filleted away by chainsaws and fire.

Since the opening of the Trans-Amazonian highway in 1972, such fishbones have appeared throughout the world's greatest rainforest with devastating effect. Ninety-five per cent of all deforestation in the Amazon occurs within 5.5km (3.4 miles) of a road.

So far, the vast stretch of forest between Porto Velho, the capital of Rondônia state, and Manaus, the capital of Amazonas, has escaped the worst of this destruction. There is a route between them, the Br-319, but the middle section of the **545-mile long** pot-holed road has been too fragile to create a proper spine for a fishbone. For six months of the year the old road is impassable, turning to mud in the winter and dust in the summer. Side roads are also deterred by buffer zones of national parks, conservation areas and indigenous territories.



However, this area in the heart of the forest is now under threat from plans to upgrade the Br-319, after asphaltting of the middle stretch of the road was approved last year by the administration of the then far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro. A team of journalists from Amazônia Real and Expresso travelled the road for the **Bruno and Dom project**, a year-long collaboration by 16 media organisations coordinated by **Forbidden Stories** to continue the Amazon reporting of the Guardian contributor Dom Phillips. This is what they found.

The south

Starting from Porto Velho, the first 120 miles of the BR-319 is paved and maintained. The landscape drags on for dozens of miles in a monotony of deforestation – thinly scattered cattle pastures, soy plantations and rice fields.

Approaching the community of Humaitá, a roadside billboard displays a giant portrait of Bolsonaro under a banner declaring: “We are Bolsonaro, we believe in God and we value family.” The road has not brought big improvements in social or economic development. Humaitá’s per capita GDP is a quarter of that in São Paulo and this town is in the bottom third of Brazilian municipalities in a social development index.



A billboard promoting the former president Jair Bolsonaro is displayed alongside the BR-319. Photograph: Amazônia Real

The next town along, Realidade (Reality), is where the asphalt runs out and upgrade work would begin. The town has no pavements or stable electricity. During storms, sewage overflows on to the tracks. But settlers have high hopes.

“If you have the road it will help a lot. I’ll be able to go by car whenever I want, the city will be much better, it will have better basic sanitation,” says André Bispo, 29, who moved to Realidade three months ago with his wife, Gisele Cristina, 21, and their one-year-old daughter, Ive Cristina. The couple have opened a roadside diner and dream of opening a ranch. Bispo says the money earned from selling two hectares of land in his old home town of Presidente Médici is enough to buy 90 hectares in Realidade. As yet he can afford neither a fence nor cattle, but he has already embraced the cowboy style – a wide-brimmed hat, leather boots and a big-buckled belt.

Such dreams have inspired people to push illegally into the forest ever since the military dictatorship opened the BR-319 in the 1970s as part of a plan to settle the Amazon and integrate it more closely with the rest of Brazil.



André Bispo: ‘If you have the road it will help a lot. I’ll be able to go by car whenever I want.’ Photograph: Amazônia Real

Organised crime

More sinister motives drive many recent settlers, as is increasingly clear as the road nears the municipality of Tapauá. “We already see organised crime settling

in these areas,” says Lucas Ferrante, a scientist at the Federal University of Amazonas. Several protected areas were established in the area as a “green belt” to prevent settlement and deforestation, but enforcement is inadequate so land-grabbers and criminal organisations are moving in, opening up more roads and clearing forest.

The invasions accelerated under Bolsonaro, when the government gutted protection agencies. Since 2019, the forest reserve at Tapauá has not had a manager on the ground. “It is abandoned. It has no one,” says Raimundo Amaral, who is part of the BR-319 Observatory watchdog. He says that in Bolsonaro’s final year there was a surge of clearance in the Tapauá region: “The guys went crazy to deforest whatever they could while they had the federal government’s support.”

Work has accelerated on a spur road – a rib of the fishbone – which follows the route of a partly-constructed road, AM-366, penetrating the western forest towards Tapauá, 55 miles away from the BR-319. This side road is being built on two fronts that are now just 20 miles apart and hundreds of people have moved into areas alongside the completed stretches.



Workers carry out maintenance on a paved stretch of the BR-319. Photograph: Alberto Cesar Araujo/Amazônia Real

The local mayor, Gamaliel Andrade, says the spur road brings benefits to his town: “With this, BR-319 will help the municipality a lot with exports. It is a dream for the state of Amazonas and the people of Tapauense.”

The conservative-aligned politician adds: “The old people don’t want the road to open at all because robbers will come, thieves will come, they will take people hostage. For the young, it is a dream to leave Tapauá in the morning and be in Manaus or Porto Velho in the afternoon.”

A few weeks after this interview, on 8 May, Andrade was arrested by federal police with 100,000 reais (£16,350) in cash as he was boarding a plane in Manaus. He was released hours later. According to the local press, the authorities are keeping an investigation open after receiving an anonymous tip about alleged irregularities.

Indigenous concerns

Indigenous people are already threatened by incursions into their territory and forest clearance. From Tapauá, it is another three hours by boat to the Apurinã Indigenous community.

Although prior consultation with these communities is compulsory for any project, the village cacique, Marino Batista of São Francisco village, says that when the authorities showed him the blueprint for the BR-319, nobody listened to his concerns. “Through the BR-319, more farmers, ranchers, loggers and hunters will come in. One day it’s going to bring problems.”

The spur road effects are more direct. With the blocking of tributary rivers, the supply of fish has diminished. And the noise of the machines tearing through the forest has been driving animals away, making hunting difficult. Batista also warns of pollution and blockages of waterways. “We are feeling [the effects of AM-366]. In the past, the Tauá Mirim (river) was beautiful, clean. Today it looks like the water of the Purus River, muddy, right? We depend on nature, on pure water. The fish are also there, it can happen that the fish die because of the contamination,” he says.



Marino Batista, of São Francisco village: 'Through the BR-319, more farmers, ranchers, loggers and hunters will come in.' Photograph: Amazônia Real

Supporters of the road

But at the far end of the BR-319, in the city of Manaus, all these fears are dismissed by the road's powerful political advocates. Plínio Valério, one of the three senators representing the state of Amazonas at the national congress in Brasília, says access is the key to prosperity. Manaus is a big city, an industrial hub with a population of 2 million people, yet it is also isolated – an island in the forest that can only be reliably reached on the Amazon River. “River transport is much more expensive than land transport,” Valério says. Rebuilding the road “benefits industry and commerce. All the costs will go down.”

This argument is contradicted by a doctoral thesis published in 2007 by the University of São Paulo that suggests haulage from Manaus to São Paulo by the BR-319 will be 19% more expensive than by the current river freight route.

The decision the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who has promised to cut deforestation to zero by 2030. His environment minister, Marina Silva, has challenged the validity of the BR-319 upgrade licence issued during the Bolsonaro era. “We are experiencing climate change due to the increase in fires and deforestation. If we do not stop to think about the situation

in the Amazon, the situation will get worse. The BR-319 issue is being evaluated. There is a licence that was given and it is being revisited,” she said.

But pressure is growing on the government. Most of the governors and senators in the Amazon region are Bolsonaristas. They support big infrastructure projects such as the BR-319. Many senior rightwing politicians are calling for the dismissal of Marina. If she goes, so – most likely – does any chance of preventing another fishbone from dessicating another great swathe of forest and opening the way to the western Amazon.

As dozens of scientists warned in an open letter in 2021: “Once roads are built in the Amazon, the events that follow are largely out of the government’s control.”