

Drought leaves Amazon basin rivers at all-time low

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BBC News



People living along the dried-up rivers have had to carry drinking water on their shoulders

Water levels in many of the rivers in the Amazon basin have reached their lowest on record amid a continuing drought, the Brazilian Geological Service (SGB) says. The Madeira river, a major tributary to the Amazon, had fallen to just 48cm in the city of Porto Velho on Tuesday, down from an average of 3.32m for this day, official data showed.

The Solimões river has also fallen to its lowest level on record in Tabatinga, on Brazil's border with Colombia. Brazil's natural disaster monitoring agency Cemaden has described the current drought as the "most intense and widespread" it has ever recorded.



It is particularly concerning because it has worsened relatively early in the Amazon's dry season, which typically runs from June to November.

That suggests the situation in the Amazon may not significantly improve for some months in a region which is critical in the fight against climate change, as well as being a rich source of biodiversity.

The links between drought and global warming are complicated, but climate change can play a role in worsening dry conditions in two main ways.

Firstly, the Amazon basin is typically receiving less rainfall than it used to between June and November as climate patterns change.

Secondly, hotter temperatures increase the evaporation from plants and soils, so they lose more water.

In 2023, the Amazon basin suffered its most severe drought in at least 45 years – which scientists at the World Weather Attribution group found had been made many times more likely by climate change.

Last year, the drought was also worsened by the natural weather pattern known as El Niño, which tends to make the Amazon warmer and drier than normal as well.

El Niño has since ended, but the dry conditions have persisted.

Another factor in Amazon droughts is deforestation.

Around one-fifth of the rainforest has been lost over the last 50 years, for example to make way for agriculture.

These trees provide resilience against drought because they help to increase rainfall by releasing moisture back into the air from their leaves. Without them, the Amazon is more vulnerable.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has pledged to halt deforestation completely by 2030.

But the current drought – which has helped fires to spread – highlights some of the challenges of limiting further forest loss.



Forest fires spread quickly through the already dry vegetation

The low water levels in the region's main rivers are also severely impacting the lives of local people, who rely on them for navigation.

According to Cemaden, as of last week there were more than 100 municipalities which had not seen any rain for more than 150 days.

Residents of Manacapuru, on the banks of the Solimões river, said they were struggling to get vital supplies, including food and drinking water, to the city.

"We anchored the boat here, and it was stuck on dry land the next day. We had no way to move it," fisherman Josué Oliveira told Reuters news agency.

"Nothing will get through," another fisherman explained.

Dramatic images show drought's toll on Amazon and its rivers

BY EDMAR BARROS AND DAVID BILLER

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MANAUS, Brazil (AP) — Drought is devastating Brazil's Amazon rainforest, and some rivers are falling to historic lows. Images of one of the Amazon River's main tributaries, the Negro River, show just how dramatically water is dwindling.

When The Associated Press photographed the Negro River and surrounding areas in late June and early July, it was nearly 27 meters (88.5 feet) deep at the port in Manaus. In just three months, it fell by nearly half, to 13.9 meters (45.6 feet) as of Thursday.

If the pace at which the Negro has been dropping continues, within a week it will break the record for the lowest level in 122 years of monitoring. The record was set last year, but toward the end of October.



Part of the Educandos that connects to the Negro River is visible amid a severe drought in Manaus, state of Amazonas, Brazil, Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)



Part of the Educandos that connects to the Negro River is visible in Manaus, state of Amazonas, Brazil, Tuesday, June 17, 2024. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)

The Negro River drains about 10% of the Amazon basin and is the world's sixth-largest by water volume.

Manaus, the biggest city in the rainforest, is where the Negro joins the Amazon River, which in Brazil is called the Solimoes River upstream.

Riverine communities around Manaus and elsewhere in the Amazon have been left stranded. Authorities have been distributing potable water and water purification systems. Passenger boats and supply ships are struggling to navigate the shallows. Amazonas state's fishing federation has warned that limited access to nearby, traditional fishing areas is imperiling their livelihoods, diminishing supply of the region's mainstay food and boosting prices. The cost of bottled water and other goods in far-flung areas has surged, too.

Water levels in Brazil's Amazon always rise and fall with its rainy and dry seasons — but not like this. At this time of year, the Negro River should still be around 21 meters deep at the Manaus port, according to the nation's geologic service. And all of the major rivers are at critical levels, with the most dramatic decline at the Madeira River, the Amazon River's longest tributary.

On Monday at the measuring site in the city of Porto Velho, the Madeira's level fell to just 25 centimeters (about 10 inches), a record since measurement began in 1967, and more than 3 meters below the historic average for the day. It increased the next day, but only slightly, and rivers were expected to stay low well into October.



The Taruma Acu River is visible during a severe drought in Manaus, state of Amazonas, Brazil, Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)



Part of the Sao Raimundo that connects to the Negro River is visible amid a drought in Manaus, state of Amazonas, Brazil, Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)



Part of the Sao Raimundo that connects to the Negro River is visible in Manaus, state of Amazonas, Brazil, Thursday, June 20, 2024. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)



Part of the Negro River is visible amid a severe drought in Manaus, state of Amazonas, Brazil, Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)





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Amazon rivers' low water levels bring fresh challenges for locals

By [Bruno Kelly](#)

September 9, 2024 9:23 AM GMT+12 Updated an hour ago



Item 1 of 5 River dwellers carry water gallons, on the sandbanks of the Madeira river, to bring to the isolated region of Paraizinho community, during the worst drought of the river in history, Humaita, Amazonas state, Brazil September 8, 2024. REUTERS/Bruno Kelly [1/5]River dwellers carry water gallons, on the sandbanks of the Madeira river, to bring to the isolated region of Paraizinho community, during the worst drought of the river in history, Humaita, Amazonas state, Brazil September 8, 2024. REUTERS/Bruno Kelly [Purchase Licensing Rights](#), [opens new tab](#)

HUMAITA, Brazil, Sept 8 (Reuters) - Water levels in the rivers that run through the vast Amazon rainforest have been falling, after a record drought followed by less rain, presenting unprecedented challenges for the Ribeirinhos people living there.

With rivers becoming more difficult to navigate and water too dirty to consume, many of the traditional rural population who live on river banks have been relying on outside supplies of drinking water.

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Francisca das Chagas da Silva, a resident, said older people in particular have struggled because they needed to walk much further to get water. "We have to carry it from the riverbanks to our homes," she said.

The Ribeirinhos usually get water directly from rivers or have connected systems - but these means of supply fail when water levels drop so dramatically.

Now, many residents rely on non-governmental organizations or the state government for drinking water.

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Joao Ferreira Mendonca, a community leader, said the river bank was about 800 meters (0.5 miles) away from some homes, a long distance for an older person or one with health problems.

"Now imagine a person in the hot sun, people with high blood pressure, doing this journey," he said.

The Brazilian Geological Service, SGB, has warned in recent days that all rivers in the Amazon basin were expected to drop below their historical levels.

Ribeirinhos usually live on river banks in pile dwellings - from where they move with motor boats.

Rosicleia Gomes Vieira, another resident, said life in general was becoming much more isolated because the low water levels make navigation more difficult and impossible to carry produce to the city. Other than the rivers, which have long been the main way of transport for residents, there is only a long dirt road that cuts through the dense rainforest.

In Brazil, where wildfires have also occurred, the low water levels are also hitting soy and corn shipments in center-west states such as Mato Grosso, Brazil's number one grains growing area.