

GRAPPLING WITH DEVASTATION OF THE RAIN FORESTS

by Dave Todd
Southam News



Of growing concern to the world, and in particular, Canadians, is the future of the Amazonian rain forests. The impact of the devastation of the world's rain forests is not a forestry issue, but rather an environmental issue with far reaching atmospheric implications touching citizens' of all countries. Because of Canada's leadership on environmental issues and the top priority our federal government has placed on this subject, we are reprinting an article entitled, *Crisis In Brazil*, written by Dave Todd, Southam News, first printed in the *Ottawa Citizen*, February 26, 1989.

Is saving the earth's tropical rainforests too daunting an economic and political challenge for mankind to handle?

As alarm mounts over the accelerating destruction of the forests that girdle the equator, there is no shortage of imaginative schemes emerging for arrest-

ing the ecological catastrophe that is looming.

But if everyone wants or has a vital interest in saving what many environmentalists poetically describe as "the lungs of the planet," who is willing to absorb the cost?

The problem has never even been discussed by the governments of leading industrial nations and the Third World, where the rainforests are located. And the Third World already owes hundreds of billions of dollars to industrial nations.

The urgency of finding solutions is clear. At the current rate of loss, almost all of the rainforests will have disappeared 60 years from now, says the World Wide Fund for Nature.

The United Nation's World Conservation Strategy (the Bruntland Commission report) sounded the warning nine years ago. It predicted that 110,000 square kilometres a year of tropical forests were being felled and burned, mostly by peasants-settlers in search of new farmland and fuel.

But this year in the Brazilian Amazon alone, 200,000 square kilometres of virgin forest -- an area larger than Canada's Maritime -- may be destroyed largely by soil-poisoning, slash-and-burn techniques. Only 10 per cent of those trees are harvested.

In addition, the Brazilian government has grandiose plans for a network of hydroelectric dams that would flood huge areas of the western Amazon River basin, disrupting the ecological balance and the culture of primitive Indian forest tribes in remote areas.

Despite a growing international outcry that has delayed World Bank loans, Brazil's plans for the project have provoked an extraordinary gathering in the frontier boomtown of Altamira. But now there is potential for a terrible tragedy.

The imperative to develop the Amazon as the key to the country's future prosperity threatens serious damage to the world's environment -- and compounds a classic, already genocidal conflict over the demands of pastoral and industrial interests.