

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses Jair Bolsonaro's actions concerning the Amazon rainforest and invites your thoughts on the subject.

It's shocking to realise that, no matter how many campaigns are fought, treaties signed or protected areas established, the future of life on Earth rests, to a large extent, with a handful of irresponsible, irrational and ignorant individuals.

Environmental decisions that are critical to the entire planet are made on a whim. Donald Trump did it for climate change (just for starters) and now Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro is doing it for the Amazon rainforest.

The Amazon is home to the largest rainforest on Earth. Covering 40 per cent of the South American continent, it spans no fewer than eight countries (nine, if you include French Guiana, a department of France). The most species-rich biome on Earth – with one in ten of all known species – it's also a critical carbon storehouse.

Yet this life-support machine has been plundered and destroyed for decades. Clearing to make room for cattle and crops, logging for timber and paper, mining, dam construction, road building and urban expansion are all to blame.

Destruction peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when an area the size of Israel and Palestine combined was being cleared every year. The devastation never stopped, but it did slow down for a decade or so, following international pressure and a concerted effort by the Brazilian government (Brazil controls 59 per cent of the rainforest).

Then along came Bolsonaro, in January 2019. The man dubbed 'Tropical Trump' seems to show nothing but contempt for the environment and he

promptly dismantled environmental regulations, reduced environmental law enforcement, stripped protection from conservation areas and indigenous territories, and actively encouraged the expansion of mining, logging and other damaging industries. Rates of deforestation have soared in the two years since.

By the Brazilian government's own estimates, 17–18 per cent of the Amazon rainforest has gone already (not including large swathes that are more or less intact, but degraded) with 1 per cent more being cleared every three years. We are hurtling towards an irreversible tipping point – predicted to be about 20–25 per cent destruction – when the region will enter what one expert describes as “a sustained death spiral”.

The whole world has a stake in the future of the Amazon rainforest, and Bolsonaro needs to be held accountable.

The good news is that two indigenous chiefs in Brazil clearly agree. Almir Suruí and Raoni Metuktire have asked the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague to investigate

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Bolsonaro for crimes against humanity. The UN-backed court recently added environmental crimes to its remit (along with genocide and war crimes), though if this isn't a crime against humanity, goodness knows what is.

I understand that 'owning' a significant portion of the Amazon rainforest is both a blessing and a curse. If the rest of the world wants it to be safeguarded, it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect the rest of the world to contribute financially. But I feel Bolsonaro's conduct is inexcusable.

The ICC opens a monumental window of opportunity. Bolsonaro isn't the only world leader who could be accused of ecocide (deliberately causing serious and lasting damage to the environment).

Next in the dock, I'd put China's President Xi Jinping for, among many other things, continuing to allow trade in wild animals on a staggering scale (a global risk to wildlife and human health alike – as we've learnt to our cost in the past 18 months).

It's got to be better than campaigning and cajoling – which takes too long and clearly doesn't work. It seems as though the Trumps, Bolsonaros and Jinpings of this world don't care about anything but themselves. Making these enemies of the environment personally responsible for their crimes might make them think twice before causing irreversible damage that affects us all. 🐼

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Jair Bolsonaro has caused controversy since becoming president of Brazil.