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WHERE POP CULTURE GETS IT RIGHT ON AMAZON DEFORESTATION

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The British pop-band Cold Play posted a Twitter message in August calling on governors in the Brazilian Amazon to act on slowing deforestation. Inviting the governors to participate in the coming Global Citizen event scheduled for late September, the message elicited a ready and positive response from the elected officials.

But glitz and glamor aside, Cold Play's tweet in fact gets at the often overlooked role of states in efforts to reverse Amazon deforestation.

Olá @waldezoficial @helderbarbalho @MauroMendes40 @GaldinoCedeno @celmarcosrocha @joaoazevedolins, @wdiaspi, the states you represent have a great opportunity to make climate action history. Will you join us at #GlobalCitizenLive with commitments on conservation & adaptation?

— Coldplay (@coldplay) August 23, 2021

Two recent headlines point, if obliquely, to that fact. The first from early August suggests that Brazil – home to 60% of the Amazon and a lynchpin in its long-term survival – is on track to register an on-year decline in forest loss. The second, that deforestation in Brazil has hit a decade long high.

Could both these statements be true? It turns out part of the discrepancy can be attributed to how different reporting systems define and detect deforestation, a surprisingly complex distinction based on a variety of factors including satellite image resolution, cloud cover, and whether or not forest loss from fire is counted as deforestation, among others.

According to the Brazilian government's early detection monitoring system, known as DETER, deforestation fell 4.6% for the year ending in July. DETER, operated by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE), relies on daily, real-time reporting of forest loss. It's numbers are not considered official deforestation data, however. That data comes from PRODES, also run by INPE, and is released in November.

In contrast, IMAZON is an independent Brazilian research institute that operates its own deforestation monitoring platform, which showed a jump of 56% in deforestation for the same period.

It's unusual that the two systems, which usually make estimates that are quite similar, would produce such widely divergent data. Less unusual – and often lost in the headlines about rising or falling deforestation – are key differences among Brazilian states.

Take the case of Mato Grosso as an example. A behemoth both in its geographic scale and as a global leader in agricultural production – not unlike California – Mato Grosso achieved a 20% reduction in deforestation over the August 2020 – July 2021 “deforestation year” compared to 2019-2020, a feat it managed even as the state increased its agricultural output, important given the looming challenges around food production in an increasingly crowded world.

Just to the north of Mato Grosso is the state of Amazonas, which has a far higher percentage of intact forest and where deforestation rose 35% last year.

EII scientist Matt Warren has been examining state-level deforestation data in Brazil and says the focus on aggregate-deforestation across the entire Brazilian Amazon misses this important distinction.

“Just looking at the headlines you can miss these important strides in states like Mato Grosso,” says Warren, who notes the state has managed to bring down its deforestation compared to last year, thanks in part to a concerted zero tolerance approach to illegal deforestation.

In fact, comparing DETER data across states shows a decrease in deforestation in 5 of Brazil’s 9 Amazon states last year (Mato Grosso, Amapa, Maranhão, Pará, Roraima), while deforestation increased in 4 states (Amazonas, Acre, Rondônia, Tocantins), with two of these states recording only marginal upticks. Overall deforestation remains highest in the state of Pará.

“You have to take a deeper dive into the complex socioeconomic and geographical differences between states to understand why we’re seeing these year-on-year declines in some places and increases in others,” says Warren. “While the DETER data reveal some encouraging signs between this year and last, it’s also important to look at the longer-term trends – beyond monthly or annual figures – which are often left out of international headlines.”

Understanding those differences is key to designing and implementing effective strategies to slow and potentially reverse forest loss in the Amazon, says Warren.

“For Mato Grosso you will have a different strategy than Amazonas or Pará, where you can’t use the Mato Grosso strategy because they are so different in terms of socio-economic development.”

Still, Warren adds, some essential elements are critical, including positive incentives for forest conservation, mutually agreed upon targets and goals across a wide range of actors, and equity and inclusion for indigenous people, traditional and local communities, women’s organizations, and other underrepresented groups in the strategy design processes.

Ten years ago, the world saw a flurry of international commitments all aiming to halt tropical deforestation, which nonetheless today remains a persistent – and existential – challenge.

According to Warren, a paradigm shift is needed in how strategies are designed, with far more space given to state-level, bottom-up solutions. “Who better to understand the forces driving deforestation than the people in the region?”

The Governors of Brazil’s Amazon states have made meaningful commitments to tackle deforestation using bottom-up approaches that best meet their needs, calling on the international community to partner with them on implementing these strategies. Unfortunately, the response to date has been largely “muted,” as we discuss here.

Perhaps Cold Play’s callout to Governors is a sign that the world is finally ready to listen to what they have to say.