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The Amazonian Road Decision

On the western edge of the Amazon River basin, there is a proposal to construct a road. This road would connect the remote town of Cruzeiro do Sul, Brazil, with the larger city of Pucallpa, Peru. The construction of the road has become a subject of contentious debate.

Proponents of the road claim that it would provide an efficient way for rural farmers and tradesmen to get their goods to city markets. It would also allow loggers to more easily transport timber from the depths of the Amazon rain forest to sawmills in Pucallpa. From Pucallpa, goods could then be transported to Peru's Pacific coast and shipped to international buyers.

Critics of the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road, however, argue that it would cut right through traditional territories of the Ashéninka, an indigenous people of eastern Peru. Many leaders fear the road will increase access to previously undeveloped rain forest, threatening the ecosystem and the Ashéninka way of life. Large trees, such as mahogany, for example, will catch the eye of illegal loggers because of their high market value. While the curative oils from mahogany sap are valuable to the Ashéninka, the great mahogany trees also serve as their protection from the outside world and are essential for the health of the Amazonian rain forest. The trees provide shelter, food, and nesting grounds that sustain the vast biodiversity within the ecosystem, an ecosystem the Ashéninka have come to depend on for their own food, shelter, and life sustenance.

Geography

The Amazon River basin is located in South America, covering an area of 7 million square kilometers (2.7 million square miles). Nearly 70% of the basin falls within Brazil with remaining areas stretching into parts of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Columbia, Venezuela, and Guyana.

The Amazon's massive drainage basin is made up of dozens of smaller watersheds, including the Alto Tamaya. Its watershed lies at the headwaters of the Purus and Yurua Rivers, near the border of Peru and Brazil. The Ashéninka people have lived in this region for centuries, surviving on game, fish, and cultivated crops, such as yucca roots, sweet potato, corn, coffee, and sugar cane.

Background

The rain forest surrounding the Amazon River is the largest on the entire planet. In addition to 33 million inhabitants, including 385 distinct indigenous groups, it hosts the greatest diversity of plant and animal life in the world. More than two million species of insects are native to the region, including many tree-living species and hundreds of spiders and butterflies. Primates are abundant—including howler, spider, and capuchin monkeys—along with sloths, snakes, and iguanas. Brightly colored parrots, toucans, and parakeets are just some of the region's native birds.

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Many of these species are unique to the Amazon rain forest, which means they cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

At a global level, the Amazon rain forest helps to regulate climate and acts as a carbon sink for greenhouse gases. At a national level, the Amazon is considered a source of energy and income, based on production and commercialization of raw materials.

Some of the most valued tree species in the world thrive in the rain forest. Mahogany has been nicknamed the “crown jewel of the Amazon.” The tree’s rich, red grain and durability make it one of the most coveted building materials in the world. A single mahogany tree can fetch tens of thousands of dollars on the international market.

Even though logging is prohibited in much of the Amazon basin, it is legal in some areas in large part because the sale of the wood is so lucrative. The high demand for mahogany has left many of Peru’s watersheds—such as the Alto Tamaya—stripped of their most valuable trees. Without these large trees, the watershed risks heavy flooding and soil erosion, as well as diminished water quality since the trees will not be able to filter out the pollutants and clean the water before it reaches its destination.

Conflict

The Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road is part of a larger development plan to link South America’s remote, isolated economies through new transportation, energy, and telecommunications projects. Tension exists between communities that favor developing the rural economies of the Amazon basin and those who favor preserving its forested areas and diversity of life.

The Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA) is a proposal for the construction of several highways throughout the continent, five of them within the western Amazon Basin. The Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road is one such proposed highway.

Supporters of the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road say international demand for Amazonian resources could help develop the rural economies that are scattered throughout the basin. In addition to providing a route of access for rural goods to enter the global market, the road will allow members of rural communities to access better health care, education, and welfare. This could lead to improved living conditions, healthier lifestyles, and longer lifespans.

Conservationists are concerned that infrastructure such as the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road will devastate an already weakened Amazonian ecosystem, as road access is highly correlated with

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deforestation. In Brazil, for instance, 80% of deforestation occurs within 48.28 kilometers (30 miles) of a road. Critics argue that the construction of a road along the Brazil-Peru corridor will provide easier access for loggers to reach mahogany and other trees.

Indigenous communities like the Ashéninka will also be affected. These communities have largely chosen to maintain a traditional way of life, and conservationists are concerned that the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road may expose them to disease and land theft. Some medical estimates predict that disease alone—colds, flu, and other respiratory infections—could destroy nearly half the population of these indigenous groups. Critics also claim that attempts to assimilate other indigenous peoples to contemporary urban lifestyles have contributed to indigenous poverty, alcoholism, and unemployment.

Identification of stakeholders

Indigenous Communities: Members of the Ashéninka community are trying to protect the forest and their native lands. Yet, like other indigenous communities in the area, they are in turmoil, largely divided between those favoring conservation and those seeking greater economic opportunities. While the Ashéninka want to preserve their culture and connections to the forest, they also need access to things like clothes, soap, and medicine. The road could establish trade routes that make these goods more accessible. However, isolated lifestyles could be exposed to disease and land theft.

Wildlife: The proposed Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road runs through Serra do Divisor National Park, Brazil, and other reserves that are home to threatened and rare species, including mammals, reptiles, and birds. For some of these species, such as the spider monkey and red howler monkey, the construction of the road could make their population vulnerable to fragmentation and more visible to hunters. As mahogany and other canopy giants are removed, any wildlife that relies on the trees for shelter, nesting, or food will need to relocate.

Amazonian Ecosystem: In addition to the detrimental effects on the flora and fauna in the area, the construction of the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road could accelerate erosion, reduce water quality, and increase deforestation for agriculture and timber extraction. Tropical forest accounts for 40% of the global terrestrial carbon sink. A reduced number of trees could exacerbate global warming. Fewer forests means larger amounts of green house gases entering the atmosphere.

Logging Companies: If a road is constructed, loggers will have easier access to mahogany and other trees, allowing them to generate more income and provide a higher standard of

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living for their families and communities. A higher standard of living might include expanded educational opportunities, improved health-care facilities, and the chance to participate in political debate.

Residents of Rural Communities: The Pucallpa- Cruzeiro do Sul road would allow local farmers and business people to transfer goods from the Amazonian interior to Peru's Pacific coast. Right now, merchants who want to travel between Cruzeiro do Sul and Pucallpa must do so by plane. A reliable road would improve basic infrastructure, transportation, and communication for greater commercial and social integration between Peru and Brazil, which meets part of the larger objective of the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America.

International Consumers: The global demand for mahogany makes it a billion-dollar business. Mahogany is used to create bedroom sets, cabinets, flooring, and patio decks throughout the world, mostly in the United States and Europe.

Conflict Mitigation

Groups are seeking to mitigate conflict in the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road conflict through dialogue and alternate infrastructure plans.

Environmental conservation groups have suggested that the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road be removed from the list of approved projects until the community engages in greater communication surrounding two aspects of the project. First, conservationists are seeking more information on the environmental impact of the construction. This discussion involves local environmental groups, government representatives, and businesses. Second, conservationists are seeking full consent to the project from indigenous communities.

Some critics of the Pucallpa-Cruzeiro do Sul road argue that roads are not the only option for the Pucallpa business community to extend its commerce. Traditional river systems are already in place. These critics think the fluvial network should be explored as a viable alternative to road construction.

Some argue that conservation efforts may only succeed if local communities take an active role in the defense of their native lands. The Upper Amazon Conservancy is working with indigenous peoples to help protect their native territories. One initiative involves organizing community "vigilance committees" that consist of members of indigenous peoples who help park services by patrolling the edges of national parks and keeping illegal loggers out.