

The Ecologist

May/June 1998

Campaigns & News

Campaigns ...

Worst Fires in the History of the Amazon

Little mention has been made in the mainstream media of the biggest fire in the history of the Amazon, which has turned millions of acres in Roraima, Brazil's northernmost state, into a blackened wasteland littered with the corpses of dead wildlife and cattle. After sweeping across the savannah in the north of the state, the fires now threaten the Yanomani reserve in the west. The damage to the region's biodiversity is incalculable. It is both a global and a local disaster. For the indigenous people, the Yanomani, it has meant a loss of not only their homelands but also the major sources of their food.

The fire is linked to a drought affecting the entire Amazon region and blamed on the El Niño phenomenon. (This periodic shift in warm ocean currents is fast becoming the "explanation" for any climate disturbance; meanwhile human-induced global climate change – as well as its role in exacerbating El Niño – gets hardly a mention).

No rain had fallen in Roraima between August 1997 and April of this year.

By January, the month that traditional slash-and-burn farmers clear undergrowth for planting, the drought had reduced rivers to unnavigable streams, had made grasslands dry as tinderboxes, and had removed much of the humidity from the rainforest. With no other means of clearing the land, these farmers went ahead as usual. The fires got out of hand and spread over large areas of savannah, burning cattle ranches and the pastures, gardens and orchards of many Macuxi villages. In late January Roraima governor Neudo

Campos declared a state of public calamity and appealed for federal funds to sink wells and dig small reservoirs. His appeal was ignored, apparently because of the inflated costs quoted. On February 1 the federal government environment agency (IBAMA) banned farm fires, but many farmers, unaware of the dangers or ignorant of the ban, continued to set fires to clear their land. The local IBAMA said it is was impossible to supervise 17,000 farms.

After repeated calls for help, fire-fighting assistance arrived from Brazil's federal government – and even from neighbouring Venezuela and Argentina – but the fires continued to spread. By late March, Governor Campos was appealing for more help, saying "We've never faced a fire like this before. It's an ecological disaster."

Official estimates of how much of Roraima's 221 million hectares have burned vary. Governor Campos has said 25 per cent, INPA (National Amazon Research Institute) reckoned 21 per cent, while the federal government claimed it was only 3 per cent. An INPA researcher in the area, Reinaldo Barbosa, said the fires will affect the biodiversity and environmental equilibrium of the northern Amazon, contributing to an increase in greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere. He believes it will take at least 100 years for the rainforest to recover. The drying out of the rainforest will make it more susceptible to fires in the future, especially as below-average rainfall in the Amazon is forecast for 1998. In Roraima itself the immediate toll on wildlife has been huge, as many animals and birds fleeing the fire have died of hunger and thirst.

The human population is also suffering from the effects of the prolonged drought, fires and smoke. In the capital of Roraima, the numbers of people needing treatment at the children's hospital has doubled from 100 to 200 per day, most of them with respiratory problems. An emergency meeting of medical professionals concluded that the fires had produced an environmental and epidemiological catastrophe for the Indian population.

Entire communities whose streams and rivers have dried up now have to travel long distances in search of water, while others survive on water from holes dug in the earth. Where their gardens have been burnt, the Yanomani are left without food to supplement game and

fish, which are themselves now scarce because of the drought and fire. Malaria has increased significantly.

The impact of the fires is obviously extremely serious and far-reaching. Brazil was entirely unprepared for such a disaster, which revealed the lack of any specialized personnel or equipment anywhere in the Brazilian Amazon. Although the Army and the Air Force have many bases, planes, helicopters and battalions in Roraima, they have no fire-fighting equipment or trained personnel.

In the short term, food aid is needed for the Yanomani to cover the estimated one year until they can be self-supporting again. Funds are also needed to purchase anti-malarial drugs and extra flying time to bring assistance to the sick in the villages. Long-term solutions, however, require acknowledging the role of human-induced climate change in the drought, and recognizing that such "natural" disasters will only become more common unless the rate at which industrial greenhouse gases are spewed into the atmosphere is drastically lowered, and the clear-cutting of forest land is halted.

At the time of going to press, the fires were continuing to rage through the rainforest and savannah. Meanwhile, with a kind of tragic irony, the main radio and television news was featuring the Brazilian Grand-Prix – with no mention of the fires.

To support the Yanomani write to:
CCPY, Rua Capitao Bessa 272, Bairro Sao

Pedro, 60306-620 Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil.
Tel: +55.95. 224-7568. Fax: 224-3441.
E-mail: <copy-rr@technet.com.br>

The Ecologist Campaigns & News

This section highlights current campaigns, reports activist news, and provides brief updates on topical issues compiled by Julian Oram and Janey Francis. Send news items and/or campaigns to:

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Setback in Negotiations Throws MAI into Doubt

A small victory was achieved recently when negotiators of the proposed OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) conceded that the treaty would not be ready for signature by April as hoped. Conflicts among the negotiating parties – particularly between US and European representatives – have thrown the talks into disarray. The discussions have also been hampered by pressure from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which has steadily mounted as details of the secretly negotiated treaty have emerged. The divisions mean that OECD representatives now expect the timetable to be set back by at least a year.

The MAI, which would remove all controls on capital and investment flows amongst OECD countries, has drawn widespread criticism from environmental groups, development NGOs, labour rights organizations, and Southern activists. Although veiled in secrecy for much of its three-year history, the treaty has recently started to make headlines as the draft contents and their implications for workers rights, democracy and environmental protection have become more widely understood. A copy of the draft document was eventually obtained last year by a Canadian environmental organization and made public. Prior to this the negotiations were so covert that even members of the OECD's own environmental division were ignorant of its contents.

Dubbed by many as a "charter for multinationals", the treaty would provide extensive rights to foreign investors, while undermining the ability of signatory nations to enact laws that could be considered 'discriminatory' against foreign investors – including measures to protect

domestic agriculture, industry, or natural resources. Companies who believe their interests have been compromised by the actions of national governments would be given the power to sue countries in international courts (though private citizens adversely affected by the actions of transnationals abroad are offered no such rights). It is also likely to undermine international environmental treaties such as the Kyoto protocol, and would allow national environmental policies to be challenged if they affect an investor's potential profits. The draft treaty contains no binding environmental or labour requirements for investors.

In early March, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly for the treaty to be negotiated in a more democratic forum than the OECD, and for environmental, social and development reviews of its contents. But the treaty is unlikely to be thrown off the rails so easily. There is still a strong commitment amongst leading OECD figures to drive the agreement through. "The negotiations may take more time than our governments hoped," said Donald Johnston, secretary-general of the OECD, "but producing an agreement that will stimulate foreign direct investment is worth the while". Once again the key players in the international economic order seem intent upon stripping the rights of governments and citizens in the quest for 'free' markets.

To find out about campaigns, books, briefings, reports and websites on the MAI write to: Corporate Europe Observatory, c/o Prinseneiland 329, 1013 LP Amsterdam, Netherlands. Tel/Fax: +31 30 236 4422 E-mail: <ceo@xs4all>

Swiss Reject Barges Carrying Gene-altered US Corn

The battle over genetically-altered food products took another turn when Swiss authorities in Basel turned away two Rhine River cargo boats carrying US corn gluten feed. The Dutch riverboats had been stranded at Basel's river port for more than a week while Swiss prosecutors, acting on complaints from a Swiss farm group and Greenpeace, ordered that the gluten be tested to determine if it included any genetically altered corn. The Swiss government has approved the use of Novartis' genetically altered corn, but is not willing to accept corn into the country that is different from the approved strain. When the Swiss tests found "trace amounts" of unapproved corn, they ordered the boats to leave Swiss territory. Greenpeace said that the ship had left the Port of New Orleans in February with a cargo that included soybeans as well as corn gluten for shipment to Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The controversy comes at a crucial time for campaigners concerned about the introduction of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) into Swiss markets. On June 7th, the Swiss people will vote on a referendum that puts strict limitations on genetic engineering and its applications. The referendum, an initiative of the largest coalition of organizations in Swiss history, proposes amendments to the constitution which would prohibit the creation of and trade in genetically-modified animals; prevent the release of genetically-modified organisms into the environment; and outlaw the patenting of genetically-modified plants or the parts of them.

Supporters of the amendments are up against stiff opposition from giant Swiss-based multinational corporations like Nestlé, Novartis, and Hofman-Laroche. The Swiss people are being bombarded with a massive bio-tech propaganda campaign – costing SF 35 million – conducted through all media channels. Among the manipulative strategies employed is the portrayal of the Swiss people as "backward" for considering limitations on a technology accepted elsewhere in Europe, and the stark warning that a 'yes' vote on the referendum would be a 'no' vote to "progress".

The initiators of the referendum need international support to counter the massive industry pressure. A victory for the 'yes' campaign would be an important victory for the people of Europe. It would create a strong case for campaigns internationally to ban GMOs, and would provide an example that – where the public has been consulted – they have clearly rejected biotechnology.

To support the 'yes' campaign send letters of support to: Greenpeace Switzerland, 10 Rue de Neuchâtel, CP 1558 Ch, 1211 Geneva 1 SWITZERLAND. Fax: +41 22 731 00 18, Tel: +41 22 741 03 64, E-mail: <phr@artamis.org>

New Evidence that Cambodian and Vietnamese Leaders Collude in Destruction of Forests

Investigators from Global Witness, the UK-based human rights and environmental group, have uncovered detailed evidence which proves that there has been collusion at the highest levels between political and military leaders in Cambodia and Vietnam over massive and illegal timber deals.

"We have seen stockpiles totalling 260,000 cubic metres of illegally exported Cambodian logs, worth US\$130 million (representing approximately one-third of Cambodia's National Budget), which are stored in Gialai and Song Be Provinces, at Qui Nhon Port and by the Saigon River near Saigon," said Patrick Alley of Global Witness. According to Alley, the illegal logging is destroying the forest and having a

very detrimental impact upon hill tribes and local villagers. Profits from the logging, meanwhile, will go to fund the military and political parties in the lead-up to the forthcoming election. Global Witness has identified a senior official in the Gialai People's Committee, Mr Sinh, whose high level political connections has enabled him to obtain permission to export 3,000 cubic metres of logs from Qui Nhon port, contrary to Vietnam's log export bans.

Global Witness is calling on the Vietnamese Government to take immediate action to halt the illegal exports.

Contact: Global Witness, Tel: 0181 563 779, E-mail: <gwitness@gn.apc.org>, website: <http://www.oneworld.org/global_witness/>

Bushmen of the Kalahari Evicted Violence Erupts Over Maheshwar Dam

The Bushmen who were formerly living in their last refuge of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve are now facing extreme hardship since their eviction by the Botswana government. The government maintains that the Khwe settlements in the reserve are incompatible with wildlife conservation and future tourism development, and that the Bushmen need to be rescued from their "miserable" life. However, it seems that the government may have an additional item on their agenda – namely, the lure of a lucrative diamond find. Last November, De Beers admitted to the Sunday Telegraph that a moderately large diamond pipe had been discovered inside the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. One of the Khwe Bushmen pointed out that "The government has been trying for years to get rid of us. They say we disturb the wildlife, but it's not a good reason to move us. We have always been there. It's the diamonds; we've seen the machinery moving in."

Ironically, the reserve was set up in the 1960s as a safe haven for the Bushmen and the animals they hunted. Until last year, the reserve was permanent home to approximately 1,000 indigenous people, while another 2,000 had customary land

and resource rights. Now only about 200 remain, and they are desperately clinging to their rights to the land. But the protection of wildlife – and the associated promotion of tourism – have been given priority over respecting the land rights of the Bushmen.

An international outcry led to the Botswana government shelving its plans to move the Bushmen two years ago. Survival International, which is fighting for the Bushmen in European political circles, hopes to raise enough support to deter the Botswana government from evicting the remaining Bushmen and to allow the expelled Bushmen to return. On 24 March, a negotiating team made up of representatives of the Khwe and other residents of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) met with the outgoing Botswana president, Sir Ketumile Masire. President Masire agreed that negotiations between the government and the CKGR residents should take place. However, he reserved the right of the Government of Botswana to challenge the mandate of the negotiating team.

Contact: Survival International, 11-15 Emerald Street, London WC1N 3QL, Tel: 0171 242 1441, Fax: 0171 242 1771, E-mail: survival@gn.apc.org

Villagers fighting to halt construction of the gigantic Maheshwar dam on the sacred Narmada river in India were brutally attacked by police, following demonstrations at the end of April. On the 22nd, over a thousand men and women were arrested by police after attempting to 'capture' the dam – featured in the last Ecologist "Campaigns and News" section – which threatens to flood the valley in which they live.

The following day, over 800 more villagers marched to the site. Upon arriving at the dam, however, they were attacked by commando-style police forces, who beat them and fired tear gas shells. Nearly 500 others were arrested, bringing the total to nearly 1,500 people. A number of men and women were injured, nine of them seriously.

The violence follows what appeared to be a hopeful signal from the State government, which had previously offered assurances to local people that work on the dam would halt pending further consultation. A local spokesperson said: "This has clearly shown that the state machinery, administration and police are subservient to ... national and international capital and the private companies ...".

Despite the police repression, the villagers have shown their readiness for a protracted struggle against the developer and state government.

For further details contact: Survival, 11-15 Emerald Street, London, WC1N 3QL. E-mail: survival@gn.apc.org

Opposition to Genetically-engineered Foods

Around the world, opposition to genetically-manipulated foods is on the increase. A survey carried out by order of the European Union showed that a vast majority in all EU countries would reject genetically-engineered (GE) food. Millions of people in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland (see below) have supported referenda banning GE food, patents on animals and plants, and releasing of genetically-engineered life-forms.

In many countries, people are not waiting for their governments to act: activists in Ireland, for example, destroyed a test plot of genetically-modified sugar-beets; in Australia, a consumer group calling itself "Mothers Against Genetic Engineering" uprooted an experimental plot of rapeseed containing a bacteria gene that makes it resistant to AgrEvo's herbicide Basta; members of Fife Earth First! destroyed a similar plot in Scotland.

In one of the biggest actions, 120 members of France's Confédération Paysanne, the second largest French Farmers Union, entered a Novartis conditioning and storage factory in Nérac in January and destroyed transgenic maize seeds. The action was taken to protest against the decision by the French government last November to allow the production of

genetically-engineered maize, reversing a ban on cultivation imposed by the previous government. Novartis has estimated that the farmers damaged 30 tons of seed, and is claiming \$1 million in damages. Three people involved were arrested and put on trial on the 3rd February.

Coinciding with the start of the trial, a coalition of consumers, farmers and environmental groups launched a campaign to reverse the government's decision on genetically-altered maize. The weekend before the trial, opponents of biotechnology staged protests at two Novartis sites in northern and central France. During the trial the court was packed with people, while hundreds of others gathered outside. The defendants were backed up by around a dozen distinguished witnesses, including Vandana Shiva, who gave testimony on the potential dangers of genetically-engineered crops.

France is the first country in the European Union to allow the growing of genetically-altered maize. The French government has not cleared the production and marketing of other gene-modified crops, such as rapeseed or sugar-beet, pending further studies and public debate.

For more information contact Ecoropa at: [<ecoropa@magic.fr>](mailto:ecoropa@magic.fr)

... and news

Plans for \$1 Billion Road Scrapped

Governor Parris Glendening of Maryland has reversed his long-standing support of an inter-county highway to link Montgomery and Prince George counties. The statement has delighted environmentalists who were concerned that the road would accelerate suburban sprawl and uproot established neighbourhoods. Glendening has said that the road did not take environmental concerns adequately into account and that now "there must be an entire rethinking of how to deal with traffic congestion." In conversations with some officials, he has indicated that he wants to make better use of environmentally sensitive planning methods, including new mass transit.

Destruction of Life in the Oceans

A recent report in *SCIENCE* magazine warns that the destruction of life in the oceans has progressed farther than anyone had suspected. The causes are over-fishing and pollution, but the focus of the report is over-fishing alone. In the early 1990s, scientists reported that 13 of the world's 17 major fisheries were depleted or in steep decline. The depletion of the world's most popular fish species has led to responses which are further exacerbating the problem.

One of these responses involves the use of more sophisticated technologies. The new super-trawlers, costing up to \$40 million to build, are equipped with radar and sonar that enable them to fish in the fog and dark and to locate schools of fish more easily. Geographical positioning satellites, meanwhile, accurately pinpoint locations so that ships can return to productive spots. Formerly secret military maps reveal hidden deep-sea features, such as mountains, which are associated with upwelling currents of nutrient-rich water where fish

thrive. Combined with larger nets made from new, stronger materials, these modern fishing vessels are literally sweeping the oceans clean.

New technologies developed by the military also enable trawlers to fish waters as deep as a mile, catching species that few would have considered edible a decade ago. The catch is sold in seafood stores, cooked into "fish sticks" at fast-food chains like McDonald's, or processed into fake "crab meat" for seafood salads.

Most ominous of all is the fishing that is happening lower on the food chain. As lower levels of the food chain decline, the chances of revival at the top of the food chain are diminished even further. Scientists are now discussing the "wholesale collapse" of marine ecosystems. Dr. Daniel Pauly, the author of the new study, says, "If things go unchecked, we might end up with a marine junkyard dominated by plankton ... Present fishing policy is unsustainable." Pauly believes that the true situation is even worse than his study

indicated, principally because many countries under-report their fishing harvest. Dr. Pauly is calling for protected areas where fishing is simply not allowed. He sees no-fishing zones as easier to implement and enforce than fishing quotas, limited fishing time at sea, restrictions on fishing gear and controls on pollution, though these steps too are needed. No-fishing zones can be created quickly and can be enforced. In Britain, even the fishing industry has begun to accept no-fishing zones as a way to save the industry in the face of declining fish stocks.

The article proposed shifting the burden of proof onto the fishing industry, which would have to demonstrate that its activities are not depleting ocean ecosystems. Owners of super-trawlers, for example, would have to show that their yields were sustainable in order to continue fishing. If these measures were implemented, the life of the oceans would still stand a chance of survival into the future.

No Dam Way

Canada's Innu people have shown the premiers of Quebec and Newfoundland that they are serious about blocking the development of one of the country's largest hydro-electric developments. The Churchill Falls project, a multi-million dollar venture between the two provinces, has incensed indigenous communities in the region, who are still aggrieved at the lack of compensation for a previous project that flooded the lands of 1,500 Innu people in Labrador in 1971. As the two premiers were on their way to the community of Churchill Falls to announce the deal, they found the road blocked by Innu protesters. While the two men sat inside the van, members of the community paraded around it, chanting slogans and banging drums. Even children got involved, carrying protest signs. One boy scrawled "No Dam Way" in the dust on the bonnet of the white van.

When the embarrassed premiers were eventually flown to their destination by helicopter, more protesters descended on the community centre, where the organizers had set up a press conference. Reporters eventually were whisked away and joined the two politicians at an impromptu briefing. However, the press conference was cut short when the protesters located the venue and interrupted the event. "We've shown them that we're not fooling around any more," said one protester.

The new project, spanning Labrador and northern Quebec, is part of a recent initiative to expand the number of hydro-electric dams along the Churchill river. The dams will also necessitate the expansion of the energy transportation grids.

Monsanto Monitor: an ongoing report on the activities of the corporate giant

Despite increasing criticism and protest from concerned groups in the United States and Europe, Monsanto is continuing its research on genetically-engineered crops. The corporation is currently experimenting with genes to develop herbicide resistance in wheat, alfalfa and beans, and is developing potatoes that could be "stacked" with multiple genes to protect them from fungus and prevent bruising, or even help create chips that could be cooked in less oil.

In 1995 no US farmland was planted with genetically-engineered seeds. By 1997, such crops took up some 30 million acres of farmland - mostly planted with soybeans engineered to resist herbicides like Monsanto's Roundup. This year, as much as 60 million acres may be planted with genetically-engineered strains. Arnod Foudin, deputy director of the US Department of Agriculture's biotechnology unit is reported to have said, "Last year was the year that we put to rest the question of whether this could be a commercial success."

This may, however, be no more than whistling in the wind from the USDA, a staunch supporter and promoter of biotech. According to the US-based Pure Food Campaign, Monsanto's commercial success is illusory: the corporation's \$1 billion investment in rBGH has been described by business analysts as an economic failure that, after four years of heavy promotion, is used on only 4% of American dairy cows; the Monsanto/Calgene Flavr-Saver tomato was taken off

the market in 1996 due to consumer resistance and production failures; Monsanto's entire Canadian genetically-engineered rapeseed crop had to be recalled in 1997 because of "technical difficulties"; half of Monsanto's Bt cotton crop in the US was attacked by bollworms in 1996, prompting lawsuits by outraged cotton growers; in 1997 their Roundup Ready cotton did little better, with boll damage or deformities that led to still more lawsuits; and Irish authorities made public US EPA documents revealing that Monsanto's supposedly Roundup-resistant sugar-beets were dying in significant numbers after having been sprayed with Roundup.

But with billions already invested, Monsanto remains firmly committed to biotech, and is actively seeking markets beyond North America. In Europe, with a potential market of 350 million people, Monsanto is having to bow to increasing demands to label genetically-modified foods. "We now see that Europe views labelling somewhat differently than people in the US do," said Tom McDermott, Monsanto spokesman in Europe. "This is a recognition of what the realities in Europe demand of us." What is demanded, apparently, is a better public relations spin: the decision to embrace labelling in Europe, for example, "will be a signal to people that we are more open," according to Monsanto's McDermott. "We could continue to maintain a purist attitude ... but we want consumers to have whatever they need to feel good about biotech."