

PERUVIAN AMAZON

Logging threat looms over rich wilderness

In Peru's Amazon, rare species and uncontacted tribes are at risk from quickly advancing logging.

BY DAVE SHERWOOD
Special to The Miami Herald

DULCE GLORIA, Peru — Armed with arrows, Carmelino Vasquez scurried down the jungle path, swinging his machete with the cadence of a grandfather clock. After almost an hour on foot, he swept his bow skyward to signal the end of the hunt.

"Caoba," he declared, struggling to mouth the Spanish word for mahogany, a rare species of tropical hardwood coveted for its reddish brown color and elegant grain.

Here in the vast wilderness surrounding Peru's Alto Purús National Park, the locations of such trees, worth tens of thousands of dollars in the United States, have become closely guarded secrets among members of indigenous tribes.

Industrial logging is pushing ever deeper into the area, making mahogany



PHOTOS BY DAVE SHERWOOD

HARVESTING: Right, an Asheninka tribe member gathers mahogany to dye the traditional robes worn by their tribe members, shown above. Peruvian tribes are at risk from logging.

the leading front in the ever-growing battle for control of the resource-rich Peruvian Amazon. But the threat goes far beyond any single species, said Chris Fagan, director of the Upper Amazon Conservancy.

Deforestation and the quickly advancing logging frontier have forced still-uncontacted people into violent conflict with settlers, while threatening the

sanctity of one of the last, most bio-diverse places on Earth. And scientists fear for the region's vast forests, which act as an enormous sponge, soaking in the pollutants responsible for climate change.

"This isn't just about mahogany anymore," Fagan said. "The world has a stake in what is happening here."

Watchdog groups fault Peru for failing to take



strong action to protect its forests, while also blaming the U.S. consumer for driving nearly 80 percent of the demand for Peruvian mahogany.

Though a 2009 trade pact with the U.S. obligated Peru to beef up the laws and institutions governing the forest industry,

the country's independent Ombudsman's Office and nongovernmental groups found many problems.

Stiff new penalties for illegal wood cutting focus on the loggers — who are often poor, indigenous men paid very little for grueling labor — instead of the multinational corporations driving the trade. And an Environmental Investigation Agency report found that tracking an individual mahogany tree from the Amazon forest to the docks in Lima remained difficult, if not impossible.

"This is what happens when global, no-questions-asked demand meets a place with invaluable resources and weak, corrupt or even absent institutions," said Julia Urrunaga, who coordinated the EIA study.

Former Agriculture Minister Adolfo De Córdova, who recently met with U.S. officials to discuss Peru's obligations, said improving the situation takes time.

"Improving forest management in native communities in Peru just can't be done in eighteen months," said de Córdova. "It's a process that will take years, a process that was started by the signing of the agreement and that we are pushing forward on our end."

EDGE OF UNKNOWN

Many believe time is running out.

Mahogany loggers blaze the trail for miners, farmers, hunters, coca growers and road builders, who have pushed the frontier further and further into the wilderness home of uncontacted peoples.

Loggers need not flaunt the law, says Gerson Mañaningo, a local Yurúa-region indigenous leader whose territory still harbors healthy stands of mahogany.

"The government is simply not present here," he declared, peering through the cracked wood panels of a lonely guard post on a bluff overlooking the Yurúa River.

Mañaningo's village, Dulce Gloria, is home to 50 families, in a region so remote that locals travel only by dugout canoe and carry shotguns to ward off jaguar attacks. The town borders the Murunahua Territorial Reserve, wilderness believed to harbor as many as 600 uncontacted people.

Because these people lack immunity to outsider's diseases, they are particularly vulnerable to encroaching logging and settlements.

Earlier this year,

Mañaningo says an uncontacted man, pressured by encroaching settlements, sneaked into town at night and stole yucca plants and tin pots. Another uncontacted man, he said, emerged from the forest five years ago and now lives on handouts in the downriver community of Puerto Breu.

Reports of violent confrontations between loggers and uncontacted peoples are becoming more and more frequent, he says.

BATTLE FOR AMAZON

The region's natural resources are in high demand. Gold miners, gas and oil interests and hydropower developers all vie for some of the resources, while scientists fight to defend the Amazon for its natural ability to absorb greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

The conflict pits opposing ideologies — those who call for sustainable use of the Amazon's resources — against those who believe they must be tapped immediately.

In an editorial in the nation's leading newspaper, *El Comercio*, President Alan Garcia made his position clear.

"There are millions of hectares of timber lying idle, hundreds of mineral deposits that are not being worked," he wrote in 2007, adding that the region's rivers represent "a fortune that reaches the sea without producing electricity."

Bruce Babbit, former U.S. Secretary of the Interior, has spent decades traveling the region and sees the situation differently.

"The enduring values of the Amazon are its indigenous peoples and the forests and rivers that sustain both these cultures and the richest biodiversity on Earth," he said.

The trade agreement is helping steer Peru in the right direction, but Americans have a responsibility as well, Babbit said.

"The trade agreement is a good start, but American consumers and business can also help by avoiding wood products made from mahogany," he said.

Recent over-flights by groups like Fagan's Upper Amazon Conservancy confirm logging activity continues unabated inside the reserve for uncontacted peoples — affecting both tribes living in the forest and in settled communities.

"Illegal logging will continue," Fagan said, "until the U.S. people and government unilaterally reject questionable Peruvian mahogany."

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CHOP: An Asheninka man looks up at the stately trunk of a mahogany tree — a coveted resource of the Amazon.