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Book Review

Conservation of the Amazon rainforest: the role of environmental NGO's

Guardians of the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest: Environmental Organizations and Development, L.C. Barbosa. Routledge, New York, USA (2015). 226pp

The Amazon rainforest is undoubtedly a globally iconic ecosystem and is often associated with images of pristine luxuriant forests and exuberant lifeforms. More recently however, the unique space that the Amazon occupies in the 'imaginarium' of people worldwide has slowly been replaced by images of deforestation and land conversion. Driven by development goals and by the exploitation of different commodities, the destruction of forest areas has been observed all across the Amazon biome, but particularly in Brazil where unprecedented deforestation rates were observed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This situation raised alarms with conservationists and environmentalists across the world and spurred the global conservation movement to rally in the defence of Amazon rainforests. Despite intense conflicts with advocates of agro-industrial development, several societal groups came together and achieved considerable success in slowing down the conversion and destruction of the Amazon in recent years (Nepstad et al., 2009). Environmental NGO's in particular played a key role in this process as Luiz Barbosa clearly demonstrates in his book "Guardians of the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest".

The book is organized in nine chapters that span 248 pages and provides a broad overview of the contributions of environmental organizations to the preservation of the Brazilian Amazon. The introductory chapter is particularly interesting in that it outlines the theoretical context of socio-economic world-systems and lays out how the Amazon was incorporated into international commodity chains and the global capitalist economy. It also exposes quite clearly the space occupied by NGO's in world-systems and new social movements and explains how these organizations manage to politicize commodity chains in those contexts to transform them into tools for conservation. The second chapter provides specific context on Brazilian developmental goals and environmental challenges, with specific focus on how they affect the Amazon rainforest. Chapters 3–6 go on to provide in-depth case studies of specific conservation and environmental challenges, which required environmental NGO's to

intervene at both the national and international scales in order to prevent further deforestation. The book traces the successes and frustrations of such interventions using examples of NGO interactions with economic interest groups that include the wood (mahogany), food (soy and beef) and power (hydroelectric dams) industries. While these chapters clearly demonstrate the growing influence of environmental organizations in Brazil, and in particular of NGO's with international links, Chapter 7 exposes the reactions of conservative groups within the Brazilian society to what they perceive as a plot of foreign powers to use these organizations in order to take over the Brazilian Amazon. This view of more conservative sectors of Brazilian society can be better understood in light of the many collaborations established between NGO's and foreign governments and international organizations. These collaborations are outlined in Chapter 8, with a special focus on the Amazon Region Protected Areas Program (ARPA) which has become an icon of conservation efforts in the Amazon biome due to its impressive results. Chapter 9 concludes the book with an overview of the information presented and a positive message regarding the 'guardian' role of environmental organizations in the fight for the Amazon rainforest.

Overall, the book provides a global overview of the importance of environmental and conservation NGO's to the preservation of the Brazilian Amazon. These organizations have already played a huge part in recent conservation successes and their contribution will be essential to guarantee the future of the whole biome. While the book will be of interest to anyone interested in understanding the history and context of the fight to preserve the Brazilian Amazon, it extends beyond the Amazon in the sense that it also provides a comprehensive explanation of the action-sphere of environmental NGO's in the context of socioeconomic world-systems. For this reason, I believe this work will also be significant to anyone aiming to obtain a better understanding of the contributions and challenges faced by environmental NGO's such as WWF, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth in the fight for nature conservation worldwide. Ultimately, given the overall quality of the book and the unique place occupied by the Amazon in our natural world, I would personally recommend this book to anyone with an interest in environmental and nature conservation issues.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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