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[Discussion Forums](#)

[Services](#)

- [Your Contributions](#)
- [Scientific Events](#)
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## The Amazonian Pie

By [Deepa Kandaswamy](#) \*\*

Fifteen years ago, while visiting Kolkata (Calcutta, India) for the first time, I saw at least 100 high school children protesting on the banks of the Hoogly River. I did not know what to think, as they were shouting in Bengali and waving their arms. I realized they were protesting, but about what? I asked one of the onlookers as I had a petition thrust into my face. The woman said, "The government has leased a portion of the river to somebody for fishing exclusively [in it]. The children are saying this is not correct and that the river belongs to all the people of Kolkata as do the fish. They are sending a petition to the state government asking them to withdraw the agreement and want you to sign it." I signed, amazed at the children's awareness.



Rainforest turning to farmland

Fifteen years later, I am wondering where everybody is when the world's lung, the Amazon rainforest, is being plotted out and sold like real estate while others are indulging in illegal deforestation and slave labor. To many, the Amazon rainforests conjure up scenes from Hollywood films like *Anaconda* or *Indiana Jones*. Yet what most of us don't realize is that the Amazon rainforest encompasses over 3.5 million square kilometers (1.4 million square miles), and is located between five countries: Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. It is home to over 220,000 people descending from 180 Native American tribes that survived colonization. The Amazon is also home to 3,000 types of trees, 1,500 species of birds, 1,000 species of freshwater fish, and 581 types of amphibians.

The Amazon River that runs through it, giving the rainforest its name, provides 30 percent of the world's fresh water. It is also the

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largest river in the world and the second longest, after the Nile River. The Amazon rainforests provide roughly 20 percent of the world's oxygen and absorb the carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions. This is why it is commonly referred to as the lung of the world. In the 1980s and early 1990s, many people protested and some died to save the rainforest. Francisco "Chico" Mendes was gunned down in 1988 while protesting against deforestation. He became the symbol of native people resistance and in 1994, a movie called *The Burning Season* was made based on his life.

#### Rainforest Produces the New Milk?

According to an April 2006 Greenpeace report titled *Eating Up the Amazon*, in the last two years 70,000 square kilometers (27,000 square miles) of the rainforest have been destroyed in Brazil alone. To put this into perspective, that is equivalent to the destruction of three countries the size of Belgium in two years.

Why was this done? Three US companies and one European company decided they were going to be the leading exporters of soy. The United States is now the world's leading exporter of soy beans and has resorted to illegal deforestation of the rainforests and slavery to accomplish this goal. So some are buying up parts of the Amazonian rainforests and then destroying the trees, people, livelihood, animals, rare plants, and other species to produce soy beans. All this to be the number one producer in the world?

#### Am I the only one thinking this is absurd?

Why do these companies want to be *numero uno* in soy bean cultivation?

Have Americans and Europeans suddenly changed their diet to only soy beans, soy milk, soy sauce, and tofu and will die of starvation otherwise? Alternatively, is it because these companies think that by doing so they can globalize diet and food?

I decided to check a theory of mine: that some businesses create demand by plugging it in the media using "health" journalists. I asked several people in India and the United States what they thought of soy beans. "It is supposed to be extremely nutritious,"



Soy bean: the new milk source

"Healthy and a must for vegetarians," "It is very similar to *rajma* (red kidney beans) and is supposed to be better," "Soy is the new health food. Though I don't like it, I eat it for it is supposed to be full of vitamins" were the general reactions. Then I asked them how they suddenly know so much about soy. The reaction was "My friend told me" or "I read it somewhere." No one knows why soy is good for them or how but they all just know!

When I was in Thailand, I saw something amazing: butter! Before you think I've gone stark raving mad, this was not regular butter

made from churning curd or milk products. It was butter made from soy beans served in all high-end restaurants. Soy bean butter!

You may have already tried soy milk, so it seems logical that we can have soy butter and perhaps even soy yogurt. What next? Soy ice cream perhaps! Soy is fast becoming the new "milk" and you don't need cows to make soy — just destroy rainforests and everything in them. Raising soy beans is cheaper and you don't need to worry about feeding the cows, milking them, or maintaining them. The new "milk" can grow on plants.

It is fascinating that all this is controlled by three companies and is accomplished by destroying the lung of the world. The soy fascination makes one think of Big Tobacco but with a small difference. If you enjoy smoking, you only end up destroying your lungs (and that of a few others through passive smoking), but it seems that by eating soy beans we are destroying the lung of the world.

#### [Conservation or Privatization?](#)

If a few companies are already engulfed in profits, would "smart" businessmen be far behind? They appear to have caught the scent of a good deal and are out for a piece of the Amazonian pie.

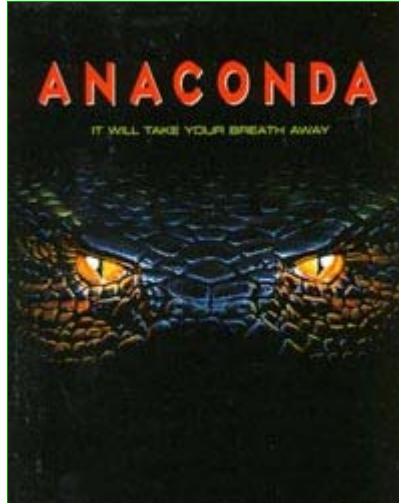
According to [a report](#) by the UK-based *Sunday Times*, billionaires are buying portions of the Amazon rainforest. Johan Eliasch, son of a Swedish billionaire, has his very own country estate: a 400,000-acre (1,618 square kilometer) plot of the Amazon rainforest and everything in it, including two species of black-headed dwarf marmoset monkeys — all for the sum of 8 million British pounds (Chittenden).

You can buy your own plot, too, if you have the money. Sellers actually have the gall to carry procedures [over the Internet](#). You may not get jungle land like Eliasch, but you can buy land with road access for as little as US\$234 a hectare. Over 200,000 hectares are up for grabs. Sellers are very polite and will sell per hectare or the entire holdings, as one seller on the site says: "60,000 hectares of land with lot of wood. Documentation ok, with writing. First class land. The total area is for sale. Price: Brazilian Real 500 (US \$234 per hectare). Total price for all 60,000 hectares is Brazilian Real 30 million (US \$14 million)." This means the current market rate for the whole of the world's lung is just US \$50 billion. This is dirt-cheap.

Tropical rainforests all over the world are up for sale. If you think the Amazon is a little too pricey for your pocket, there is no need to worry. African forests are up for grabs too, wild life, trees, and people included. Certain people quoted in the [Times article](#) actually think this is a good idea and seem to sincerely believe the billionaires are doing this for the cause of conservation! Their logic seems to be that when billionaires buy forests, they might actually care about deforestation and they will not let poachers and loggers in to their private property. OK, but why the sudden rush to buy rainforests by billionaire executives from Europe and USA? They don't live there and visit only when they feel like it. It is hard to believe that all of them woke up one day and decided they want to save the earth. If they did, they would be living there in the

rainforests.

For all those who think these folks are doing it out of the good of their billionaire hearts, I wonder why these people are not declaring these portions of the rainforest as conservation zones or building private protected ecological parks that could charge money to enter? Surely, that would be a better way to conserve or even "adopt" parts of the rainforest and ensure that the respective governments make certain that nothing is destroyed. Why are they just buying it like real estate and creating private ranches, vacation homes, and farmhouses instead? Is this conservation or privatization?



Conjuring up the Amazon

The selling out of rainforests is just another way of privatizing nature in the name of "development." The question to be asked is, development for whom? We already have our rivers being sold as bottled water. Sand and mud from river beds are dredged and sold by truck loads to construction industries for building houses — so much so that the filtering and water absorption capacities of rivers are being affected. Pebbles on beaches are packaged and sold by the ton to interior decorators. And the poaching of elephants for ivory continues despite the world ban.

Is anyone protesting? No. We have become shockproof when it comes to raping the earth.

#### [Legal Poaching and Product Patents](#)

Indian film actor Salman Khan has been handed down a 5-year jail sentence for killing a black buck, an endangered species of antelope found only in India, Nepal, and Pakistan. If Johan Eliasch decides to kill the endangered squirrel-sized black-headed dwarf marmoset on his land because he or one of his friends found them annoying, nothing can be done, as he legally owns the land and everything on it.

Wood logging and smuggling are criminal offenses, especially of rare trees. However, they are not illegal if you own the land on which they grow, according to the Greenpeace report.

Now we are looking at product patents on herbs and medicinal plants that grow in these rainforests, rights of which will be sold to multinational corporations that practice biopiracy. Do you remember the movie *Anaconda 2: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid*? Well, it is in practice now except there are no anacondas to fight these corporations. If you think this is a paranoid view, take a look at the slew of legal battles India had to fight to preserve traditional knowledge when biopirate US corporations claimed they had discovered medicinal uses of herbs such as turmeric and neem.

Traditional knowledge of these herbs has existed and herbal medicine has been practiced in India for centuries. The law, both on the international and regional level, does not say anything that would stop US corporations from patenting. How many governments and activists can be kept busy, and how much taxpayers' money can be spent to track the pirates and prevent them from patenting products in other countries?

### Return of Slavery

Just when we think slavery has been abolished as activists worldwide are trying to free sexual slaves, we find slavery in its original form is back again. Today's slavery is actually much worse, as these slaves are not even considered as property by their slave masters but as disposable toilet paper. Over 250,000 people are used as slaves for free labor in the Amazon rainforests alone. Most of them are displaced indigenous people whose land has been cleared for soy cultivation, while others are poor laborers who are brought from villages with the promise of good pay. According to reports published in several papers in the United States and Brazil, Marcelo Campos, who heads the antislavery program in the Brazilian Ministry of Labor said,

Legal slaves were property and watched over because they were an asset. Today's slave is not a concern to the landowner. He uses them as an absolutely temporary item, like a disposable razor. (Hall)

### The Way Forward

Albert Einstein once said, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing." Apart from environmental summits and human rights seminars, after which people go back to doing what they do, can something be done? When reports like the ones by Greenpeace are published, do we just sit on our hands and do nothing? Have we become so indifferent, or are we just a fatalistic generation who prefer to keep quiet? Francisco Mendes was killed for his beliefs and his choice to do something about it. Many great human beings, be they social, political, or religious leaders, were killed for what they believed in. Many of them lived in a different age when they couldn't use technology to start a worldwide movement. We do.

Here is an action plan on saving the rainforests:

1. Create awareness by talking about it with friends.
2. Start a "Save the Rainforests" campaign in your area.
3. Network with like-minded people around the world.
4. Get the children involved.
5. Pressure the government not to sell and the companies not to buy.
6. Boycott products of companies that are selling you

the food obtained from illegal deforestation and slave labor.

If you still aren't sure, think about the world you would leave your children — a world where they might have to pay for the air they breathe and the water they drink, and where they will never see a free tree again.

**Disclaimer:** The article reflects the opinions of the author.

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