

Amazon teetering on the edge

By Mario Osava

THE Amazon basin captures 12,000 to 16,000 square kilometres of water per year, and just 40 per cent of that flows through the rivers. The rest returns to the atmosphere through evapotranspiration of the forests and is distributed throughout South America.

Deforestation is reducing the humidity that, carried by the winds, contributes to the water equilibrium of vast parts of the continent. Deforestation also intensifies erosion and surface drainage, which diverts water not only away from the natural irrigation of the Amazon, but also from faraway farmland.

In 2026, an Amazon converted into "the world's last grain reserve," criss-crossed by new highways and megaprojects for energy and regional integration, will attract billion-dollar investments, but with less forest and clean water, leading to serious environmental degradation that is accentuated by the impacts of climate change.

That description is the 'Inching Along the Precipice' scenario of the *GEO Amazon* report, drafted over the last two years with contributions from 150 scientists from the eight countries of the Amazon region, coordinated by the Lima-based Research Centre of the University of the Pacific. The environmental outlook study of the Amazon (*GEO Amazonia*),

sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, and released Feb 19, lays out four possible future scenarios.

The more optimistic 'Emerging Amazonia' predicts that by 2026 there will be better environmental management and regulation of productive activities, under the "polluters pay" concept, but with a remaining lag in eco-efficient technologies and best use of biodiversity.

In another scenario, 'Light and Shadow', the region continues seeking sustainable development routes, with an emphasis on science, technology and innovation, and attempting to halt harmful productive activities. 'The Once-Green Hell' scenario portrays a more dramatic future, with "irreversible loss of natural and cultural wealth," more poverty and deeper inequalities.

The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) methodology developed by UNEP is interesting because it offers an integral view and describes "possible situations conditioned by different factors and uncertainties" in order to guide decisions, says Marcos Ximenes, director of the environmental research institute of the Amazon, known as IPAM, which contributed to the report. ■

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