
Interview: Gilberto Mestrinho

The Amazon could support 50 million inhabitants

The following interview with Gilberto Mestrinho, governor of the state of Amazonas, Brazil, was granted to Lorenzo Carrasco and Silvia Palacios. The interview was conducted in Manaus, Amazonas, on Dec. 25, 1992.

EIR: Why is the Amazon the focus of all of the pseudo-ecological international pressures?

Mestrinho: What the world sees is that the Amazon was discovered by satellite—its fantastic potential in the areas of mineral wealth and forestry resources, not to mention its genetic bank. The First World, which allowed one man [Herman Kahn, of the Hudson Institute] to try to flood the Amazon to create a huge lake with no opposition from the environmentalists—on the contrary, with their support, and with complete disregard for the rain forest—suddenly begins a campaign to promote the “untouchability” of the Amazon because exploitation of the Amazon’s natural wealth could compete with their other international investments; and because the market would have to be divided, prices would naturally drop because of greater supply, and they would suffer losses.

So it was easier, through publicity and environmental campaigns, to induce the Brazilian government—saying that exploration of the region posed a threat to the world’s climate—to keep it in backwardness. And thus they would continue to take advantage of their exploitation in other areas, as long as those resources maintained their value. The truth is that, within a few years, as a result of science and technology, our resources will no longer be valuable economically, because laboratories will substitute for nature. So they need to exhaust the resources they have, and can’t allow competition in the markets.

So on the environmental issue, 80% of the argument is to defend the developed world’s economic interests.

EIR: Beginning in 1988 and 1989, there was a lot of talk about limiting national sovereignty, using ecological, humanitarian, or indigenous issues.

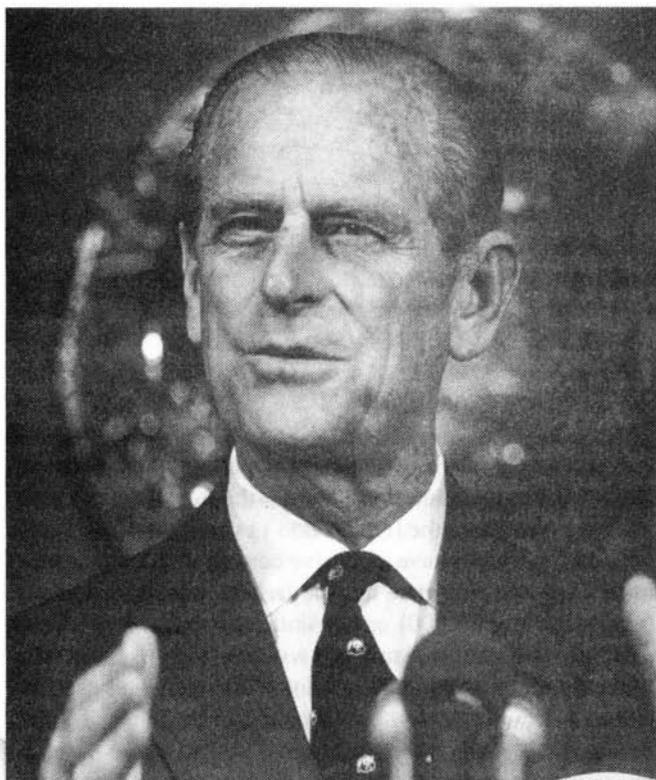
Mestrinho: This was really the context. All of these issues seek to halt the exploitation of the Amazon’s resources. So

these issues are raised periodically by people who don’t even know what Indians are, don’t consult them, and defend their alleged rights when the Indians don’t even want them. From what I know, and I have extensive contact with Indians here in the Amazon, the state has the largest number of Indians (approximately 84,000) and maintains them in a good co-existence with non-Indians, and with me, the governor. The Indians seek integration; they want to maintain their pseudo-culture—I don’t know how to characterize Indian culture because it is really very backward—but they also want to improve their quality of life. They want to become integrated with society, they want to study in the schools, graduate, and they want to exploit natural resources; they want to live in harmony with non-Indians, fraternally, just as they are in fact doing here.

Now, the protectors of the Indians, to defend their own interests, raise the Indian problem, as they did recently in the fight over the demarcation of the Yanomami reserve. The Yanomamis came from the north and stopped at the Brazilian border with Venezuela; nonetheless, their lands were demarcated hundreds of kilometers from the border, in areas they never inhabited. Why? Because that entire region, which is rich in valuable minerals from the Black River, was considered untouchable, precisely so as not to threaten the First World’s interests, because they have explored for those minerals in other areas of the world.

The same is true of the forest, because the lumber industry is run by the U.S., Canadian, Swedish, and Finnish cartels. We don’t participate in that market. South American participation is not even 2%, yet we possess 50% of the forestry reserves. But if we were to enter the lumber market, of course the price would drop and we would take a fraction of that market. Therefore, for those interests, it is crucial to keep the jungle untouched. That’s the main reason behind the campaigns you see here.

As for the internationalization of the Amazon, many people think that we’re denouncing a military occupation. But that’s not it. The internationalization of the Amazon is about the impossibility of exploiting our wealth. Leaving the Amazon untouched won’t hurt First World interests; but any day



Britain's Prince Philip (left) and U.S. Vice President Albert Gore, two leaders of the international campaign to strip away Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon. Says Governor Mestrinho: "You see, they talked about the burning of the Amazon, but in the end, it was Windsor Castle that burned!"

now, they will charge that we are incapable of exploiting our own genetic bank which, with the help of biotechnology and genetic engineering, will be the great agro-industrial market of the future. And if, by then, they haven't transported, as they are now doing, the genes, the active principles of medicinal plants—fungi, bacteria—from this region, synthesized in the First World's laboratories; if they don't already have their own bank, they will charge that we are incapable of administering the Amazon, and then there will be an occupation.

EIR: But don't you think there is a real threat of intervention when, for example, French President François Mitterrand named the Amazon as an area of interest for all of humanity, which would justify the First World's so-called right of intervention?

Mestrinho: That idea was defended not only by Mitterrand but by others. But as of Eco-92, when the absurdity of these proposals was confirmed, they adopted other means by which to always keep these pressures on the Amazon, to prevent us from exploiting it.

EIR: One of your main rivals, former Environment Secretary José Lutzemberger, whose ties to the British Crown have been proven, was politically defeated. But what do you think

of the British Crown's interest in the Amazon, particularly the role of Princes Charles and Philip?

Mestrinho: For example, we know that the "tin brothers" dominate the Malaysian and Thai tin markets; and that simple tin exploitation in the Amazon closed down those mines, which happened to be British, and that obviously hurt their interests, so they have to find other means, using environmentalism to prevent exploitation. But when we talk of tin, we also talk of gold, tantalite, niobium, and several minerals we have here, whose markets are dominated by those international groups in other parts of the world. The same is true of lumber.

EIR: What are your expectations regarding the new Clinton administration in the United States, particularly the election of Albert Gore as vice president, who, as senator, was one of the central figures pushing the Amazon issue, especially making a scandal of the rainforest burnings?

Mestrinho: My sense is that there is an awakening, a new consciousness in the world regarding the region, because through a national effort and with the aid of people who came here from abroad and investigated, we were able to demystify the issue and show that there was no devastation, that it was a lie. Of the entire Amazon, man has only affected 9.5%. That doesn't mean that those areas had their shrubbery up-

rooted. No, another type of vegetable cover was substituted. And in my state [Amazonas], for example, only 1.24% of the area has been developed. The burnings done here are the same type of field burnings still done in the United States. Thirdly, why do Americans talk so much about the environment? They've destroyed 90% of their forests, and are the biggest polluters of the environment. They should first correct their own mistakes.

EIR: But aren't you afraid there will be greater pressures, especially through Gore?

Mestrinho: No, because the United States is going to have to pay attention now to its domestic problems. It has very high unemployment, and the greatest pollution is the pollution of misery, and it has misery. So they have to deal with that first, and if they do, the environmental issue will have to remain in the background.

EIR: Concern has been expressed, including from the military institutions, over those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of a religious, ecological, or indigenist character.

Mestrinho: I think that the Rio conference was especially beneficial, because all those radical NGOs linked directly to foreign interests lost their sponsors and were left in bankruptcy, as seen by the debts they owe to the Rio de Janeiro government. Although everyone is concerned about the environment, every human being from the time he opens his eyes, comes face to face with the environment and no one wants to destroy it.

A whole industry actually developed around the Amazon. We once counted more than 200 organizations in the world which raised funds to defend the Amazon, and those resources never reached this region, and those people never set foot here. This was a worldwide industry. We actually exposed some NGOs; we showed their accounting books, how much they collected, and that no money ever reached here. A lot of people lived awfully well in the name of the Amazon and the environment.

EIR: Are there some religious NGOs or sects whose purpose is not to spread the gospel but interfere in a different way?

Mestrinho: This is notorious here. In the past, rather than bring the Holy Book, some groups brought their Geiger counters. This was particularly the case in the border areas, in southern Venezuela, in Peru, where there were many so-called "missionaries" and others who tried to provoke the Indians against the white men, viewing the non-Indians as enemies of the Indians. Yet we have been living here in harmony with the Indians since the Discovery. I always say that I'm the best example of the integration of the non-Indian with the Indian. My grandmother was an Indian and this is my third term as governor of Amazonas. If those protectors of the Indians had existed at that time, I never would have become governor.

EIR: They want to keep the Indians as zoo specimens.

Mestrinho: They want to keep the Indians as a livelihood for themselves. They live off the exploitation of the Indian.

EIR: On the other hand, don't you think there is a danger of this "primitivist" line, of cruelly and criminally maintaining the Indians as a "genetic" reserve, leading to an offensive against the Amazon, using the Indian problem as a pretext, especially after the Guatemalan pro-terrorist Indian, Rigoberta Menchú, received the Nobel Peace Prize?

Mestrinho: I like to see how all those Europeans who select the award recipients treat the gypsies. [The gypsies] are their Indians, and they don't even let them in the street. I would only believe in their honesty, in their intentions, if they gave back the lands they took from the North American Indians; and the same in Europe, because there were Indians there, too. Why don't they give the land back to those natives?

EIR: Do you think that the fact that the United Nations declared 1993 to be the year of the Indian, could provide the cover for reproducing phenomena such as Shining Path in Peru? Couldn't parts of the Amazon, for example in the Yanomami area, be targeted, especially because Shining Path was created as a project of French anthropologists?

Mestrinho: This is the risk we run, because we are aware of the intention of creating an enclave here in the Amazon. But today the population is clear on this and won't allow it to happen.

EIR: Touching on another topic which you mentioned briefly, what is the real extent of the Amazon burnings?

Mestrinho: As I explained, the burnings done here take place at the end of summer to clear the fields, the agricultural areas, and pasture lands. The burning is the most practical way of clearing them, just as is done in the United States. But burning the rain forest doesn't exist in the Amazon. That's a total lie. People have taken events which occurred during two periods of our history, one when central Brazil, that region in southern Pará state, was penetrated by foreign interests which built a meat-producing center for export to Europe, when meat was scarce there. The other case was the colonization of Rondônia and Acre states, also done at foreign instigation with financing from the World Bank. At that time there were landslides in the region, and consequently burnings, but these were isolated events. And since Francisco de Orellana came down the river and Vicente Pinzon reached the edge of the Amazon before Pedro Alvares Cabral even arrived in Brazil, only 9.5% of the Amazon has been developed, and then only to build cities, roads, and cultivate native crops.

EIR: In your view, what impact does the rain forest have on the global climate?

Mestrinho: Our rain forest has a negative balance of oxy-

gen-carbon dioxide. Because the forest only produces oxygen during the day when the tree grows. At night, the tree stops producing oxygen and it absorbs all the oxygen generated, sometimes with negative factors. The renewal of the Amazonian rain forest would be beneficial for atmospheric cleansing. Because, what is a tree? A tree is carbon gas transformed into wood. So when the vegetable is growing, it takes the carbon gas from the atmosphere and transforms it into wood. This occurs in the process of renewal. If we measure the quantity of carbon gas expelled into the atmosphere annually and verify its balance, we see that a third of it is reabsorbed in the natural automatic renewal of the tropical forests. There are 1.5 billion tons of carbon gas transformed into wood each year in the region. The largest concentration of carbon gas in the world is found over the Amazon.

EIR: The secretary of strategic affairs will shortly finish a plan for the ecological-economic zoning of the Amazon. What are the guidelines you consider most appropriate for the development of the Amazon?

Mestrinho: We have an agreement with the Strategic Affairs Secretariat to implement that program here. The point is to develop our potential. Today in the Amazon, we know what to do and what not to do, and how to do it. We know that the tree must be cut, as we have always done, between half a meter and a meter above ground, because this way it

grows, or its offspring around the trunk engages in photosynthesis and grows. That's why, when we had the steam engine in the Amazon basin, all energy generation—the wood for the steamboats—came from the forest. But today you can't even identify where in the forest it came from.

This went on for more than 50 years, and we had the largest river fleet in the world and were among the first Brazilian cities to have an electrical system, and yet today you can't even tell where that lumber came from in the forest. Why? Because the forest was redirected—what you call today self-sustainable—such that it renewed itself. If you take care of it, the forest renews itself automatically. It renews itself because nature shows that it's a region of trees. Here the soil is only a supporting element.

EIR: And what about the so-called extractive reserves the ecologists rave about?

Mestrinho: This is total stupidity. What they talk about is pure romanticism. Extracting rubber by cutting down trees in the jungle is the most inhuman and uneconomical activity which exists. A good rubber tapper, who grew up among the rubber trees on a good plantation, on his own can't make even half a minimum wage. If he were very good and produced 50 kilos of rubber, with that he won't earn anything. So it's uneconomical and leads to misery.

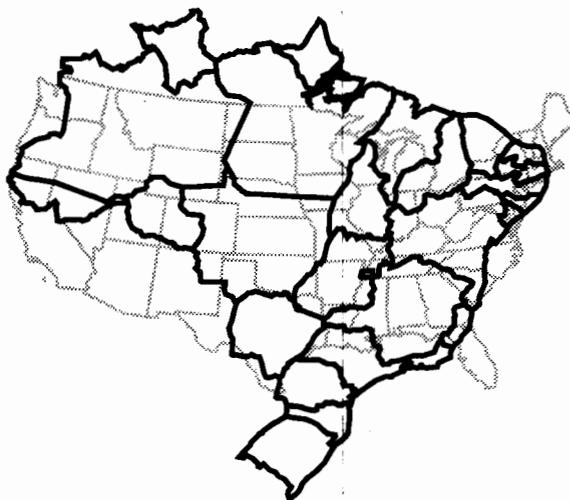
The forest has to be managed rationally, as an industrial

The Amazon: a huge land with few people

The vastness of the Brazilian Amazon can be appreciated by the fact that if it were an independent nation, it would be the largest country in Ibero-America, and the sixth largest in the world. The entire nation of Brazil is larger than the continental United States, and its economy is the eighth largest in the world.

Paradoxically, the Amazon "nation" would also be one of the least dense in demographic terms. With an area of 5.1 million square kilometers, or 60% of the 8.5 million square kilometers making up the national territory, the Amazon includes barely 10 million inhabitants, or 6.6% of Brazil's total population of 150 million people. The population is concentrated in very few regions—in the northeast of the state of Pará, the Lower Amazonas around the city of Manaus, in Acre, Rondônia, and in some areas of the Amazonian part of Maranhão. The rest of the popu-

Brazil's land area compared to the continental United States



lation is distributed among smaller cities and villages along the rivers, making the country's interior a real demographic desert.

activity. Rationally but industrially, taking advantage of all the potential and using either natural or artificial replacements. I think that the best way to develop the forest is to take a very heterogeneous area—so that in the same area you have four species of rubber trees and three species of fine lumber trees, so that if you cut three, you add six or eight to increase density with more profitable species and maintain the ecosystem. What you can't have is a monoculture, and that's why the rubber monoculture didn't work here [a reference to a Ford Motor Co. project, called Fordlandia, set up at the beginning of this century]. Trees live symbiotically, feeding each other, and defending each other from diseases. This is the most natural and best way to protect the forest. The carpet moths will do away with an uncontrolled forest.

EIR: There are also a lot of international campaigns against building hydroelectric projects in the Amazon, supposedly because the clearing of the underbrush is too great. What do you think of this?

Mestrinho: Today, with the enormous quantities of gas discovered, I think it's cheaper, more convenient, and faster to build natural gas plants. But to say that hydroelectric plants threaten the Amazon is stupid for the following reason: If we were to use the 130 gigawatts which we potentially have here in the Amazon, we have to flood only 1% of the region.

EIR: It appears that the ecologists' concerns with nature go to such an extreme that they place the human being on the level of inferior species, and even below them; that's seen in the fact that these ecologists aren't as concerned about the starving children, or hunger in the world.

Mestrinho: This is a fascist, anti-Christian sentiment, because the human being is more important than nature. The most important thing in nature is man; he is the beginning and the end of everything, and all of society's actions are geared toward benefitting man; he is superior to everything, and in fact, only he is capable of protecting the other animals, the forests, and not the other way around. Man is capable of making artificial forests and generating animals through genetic engineering, but no animal, no bird can create man. So we must take care of man.

Those sentiments are part of the economic interests, because they demand that here, but I doubt they do it in their own countries. They enjoy their comfort, well-being, and wealth. Recently, I asked a group of U.S. newspaper owners who were here discussing the ecological problem: "You talk of destruction here, but you nonetheless have destroyed 90% of your own forests." "Yes," they answered, "but there we generate comfort, well-being, and jobs for a lot of people." "And don't we have the right to do that here?" I asked.

EIR: Many times you've spoken of the problem of hunting, because it's prohibited in some areas of Brazil, and this has been applauded by many foreign environmentalists.

Mestrinho: These are the same people who entertain themselves with caviar and eat salmon. What's interesting about this is that in most civilized countries there are regulations for the protection of fauna. Hunting is practiced in Switzerland, France, Italy, Germany, and Sweden. For example, last year in Sweden 600,000 deer were killed. Here in Brazil, there is a fantastic potential, but we can't take advantage of it. Why not? Because the world market for skins is dominated by groups, and if we enter that market, we'll hurt them. So it remains prohibited; moreover, in contraband trade, they pay only 10% of the value.

EIR: You mean that this has very big economic potential?

Mestrinho: Consider the following. The price of alligator skin on the international market is \$33 per square foot, or approximately \$100 per skin. If our natives could sell a skin at that price, they would make an extraordinary profit, and would take better care of the alligators. Today, he kills on the sly, and the smuggler comes and says, "Look, I only have \$5, and if you don't sell, I'll denounce you to IBAMA" [the Brazilian Environmental and Natural Resources Institute]. So regulating hunting would be good for Brazil, for the forest inhabitant, and for the fauna, because it would put an economic value on the animals. Cows or sheep don't become extinct just because they have economic value.

EIR: You've often said that the Amazon is not just inhabited by Indians, but by other people, who are the majority. How do these people live?

Mestrinho: I think we are all Brazilian citizens. The state of Amazonas today has a population of 2.6 million people, including 84,000 Indians. If we want to provide protection to the Indians, we should protect those 2.6 million inhabitants, who are Brazilian, and also children of God, who are fighting to develop this region and maintain its sovereignty.

EIR: Last August, you were invited to attend the meeting in Rimini, Italy [the annual Meeting for Friendship among Peoples, sponsored by the Catholic mass movement Communion and Liberation—ed.]. What did you present there?

Mestrinho: I discussed the problem of the Amazon—the mystification which exists, the truth, the scientific fallacies alleged. I countered all of them. I then showed that my ecological standpoint is a profoundly Christian one, because I learned as a child, and this is in the Bible, that Christ came to save man—I don't recall any chapter or verse which says He came to save the trees and the crocodiles.

EIR: And how did that Catholic audience respond?

Mestrinho: I got a standing ovation, so it was a good response.

EIR: The document prepared for the Eco-92 conference, *Our Common Future*, revives Malthus's thesis that natural

resources are finite and cannot tolerate population growth. Do you think the Amazon is overpopulated?

Mestrinho: I think there is a great scarcity of people in the Amazon. Anyway, [malthusianism] is garbage. Malthus's theories were totally discredited, because man's capacity for creation is fantastic. Imagine the following: Japan has no arable land; it's an industrialized nation. But some years ago it had to organize the "Drink a Glass of Milk" campaign because it had so much. Look at Holland, for example. It's so small, but it exports dairy products for the whole world. Europe produces beet sugar, yet with all of our immense territory, we produce less sugar than Europe.

EIR: What are your calculations in terms of the population the Amazon could support?

Mestrinho: Fifty million people.

EIR: And how would you feed 50 million people?

Mestrinho: With trained people here and with technology, we could feed the Amazon and the world.

EIR: But how would food be produced?

Mestrinho: Through floodplain agriculture, which is highly productive, without causing environmental damage.

EIR: How does floodplain agriculture work?

Mestrinho: First there must be a political decision to occupy the region, with human contingents trained in the selection of species planted and produced here; you need appropriate equipment for the floodplain, such as micro-tractors or wide-wheel tractors, because of the nature of the floodplain. The river fertilizes the land and it's ready for planting. It's just a matter of making the furrows and putting in the seeds. We also have a variety of fruits. No region in the world has the conditions for producing citrus and *dendé* oil that we have. We don't have diseases or frosts that threaten citrus fruits.

On the floodplain, we could have high yields of rice, corn, beans, soy, fibers, and roots.

EIR: Do you have any message for our readers?

Mestrinho: I'd like to tell them that 95% or more of what is said about the Amazon is myth. The Amazon is virgin, almost as virgin as when Pinzon arrived here, even before Cabral, and saw the sea he called the freshwater sea. And 40 or 50 years later, Orellana came down the Amazon River and became delirious when he saw women riding on horseback 300 years before horses were brought to the Amazon.

EIR: Queen Elizabeth, the chief representative of the British Crown, which led the campaign against the burnings in the Amazon rain forest, said that 1992 was a "horrible year" for them.

Mestrinho: You see, they talked about the burning of the Amazon, but in the end, it was Windsor Castle that burned!

Oligarchy wants to grab the Amazon

This article is based on the chapter "Why the Amazon?" in the report Brazil and What's Behind International Environmentalism, produced in June 1991 by EIR's Rio de Janeiro bureau.

From the beginnings of the colonization of the American continent, the wealth of the Amazon has attracted the attention of explorers and foreign governments. Nonetheless, until recently, with the exception of episodic efforts at the beginning of the century or during World War II, or isolated undertakings such as the Amapá manganese exploration project, since the 1950s, there has been no large-scale utilization of the region's natural resources. During that period, manifestations of foreign interest in taking control over the region have tended to accompany what efforts did occur.

Over the past 25 years, two factors have especially contributed to the great interest currently displayed regarding the Amazon. The first was the 1967 discovery of the mineral deposits at Serra dos Carajás in the state of Pará, one of the most significant such discoveries internationally in recent decades. The region's high-quality iron reserves alone were valued at \$300 billion by Chase Manhattan Bank. The other factor was the rapid advances in biotechnology, of which the availability of "genetic banks" is of particular relevance, provided by the Amazonian ecosystem's tremendous biological diversity.

In terms of the region's mineral resources, one of the great experts on this matter, geologist Breno Augusto dos Santos, discoverer of the first deposits at Serra dos Carajás, wrote in his 1980 book *Amazonia: Mineral Potential and Development Perspectives*:

"Its deposits of iron, aluminum, and manganese occupy a crucial position on the world scene; the recent discoveries of copper perhaps represent the most notable event of the past ten years, in terms of new sources of this mineral; its gold and tin deposits, although only modestly evaluated, could acquire great economic importance."

Beyond this, the region also possesses great potential for some of the so-called third generation minerals, such as titanium, niobium, and platinum.

The author emphasizes other positive characteristics of the region:

"Its strategic position regarding international markets,