

The Amazon's Texan saviour

May 26th 2005

From The Economist print edition

Can John Cain Carter, an American rancher, save the rainforest?



AT THE helm of a second-hand Cessna aircraft, John Cain Carter is as preoccupied with the Earth below as he is with the clouds ahead. An expanse of pasture the size of a small principality "used to be all forest," he points out, banking right. And the flood plain between the Rio Araguaia and the Rio das Mortes was once "stirrup-high in water. Today you can drive a jeep out there in the rainy season," he concludes, ruefully. Mr Carter attributes the unnatural dryness to landowners who cut down trees to make way for pasture, shutting off the supply of moisture from tree to cloud. Watching it happen "is a nightmare."

These comments are given extra credibility by the fact that Mr Carter is himself a rancher, with 8,100 hectares (20,000 acres) on the denuded eastern edge of the Xingu river basin in Mato Grosso, a vast Amazonian state. But he is convinced that landowners, now widely reviled as enemies of the rainforest, could become its saviours. That will require incentives, which can only come from the increasingly globalised markets for Brazilian beef and soya, now the main threats to the rainforest. Mr Carter, an irrepressible Texan, has ambitious plans for encouraging consumers to provide such incentives and producers to accept them.

His idea is gaining traction. In the year to August 2004, according to data released this month, 26,130 square kilometres (10,000 square miles) of Amazon rainforest were

destroyed in Brazil, mostly by ranchers, farmers or speculators who cleared land in anticipation of ranchers and farmers coming. That is the second-highest level of destruction on record. The law supposedly limits deforestation to 20% of privately owned rainforest, while a network of reserves protects some public land. But in practice frontier law is feeble. So some environmentalists have decided to co-operate with landowners rather than fight them.

This co-operation began in the logging industry. Furniture-makers who buy wood that is harvested "sustainably" can now slap the seal of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) on their wares, encouraging sales to green-minded consumers. There is now a scramble to adapt this approach to ranching and farming, which do more damage to the rainforest. Last month, The Nature Conservancy, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), announced an agreement by which Cargill, a huge American agriculture company, will buy soya near its export terminal at the confluence of the Amazon and Tapajós rivers only from farmers who obey the law or are clearly moving towards doing so.

What is novel about Mr Carter is that he sees things from the point of view of the producers, and is rooted in ranching—a bigger threat to the Amazon even than soya. He is the driving force behind Aliança da Terra, a new NGO that aims to be a "bridge" between producers and environmentalists, promoting standards of good practice that both sides can live with. Global worries about foot-and-mouth disease and the like are already pushing Brazilian producers towards certification. If Mr Carter has his way, all of Brazil's agricultural output will carry an FSC-style seal, reflecting health, environmental and social standards.

Would such certification really change much? After all, wood certification has not yet stopped predatory logging, largely because much of the wood hauled out of the Amazon is sold in Brazil, where low prices count for more than green guarantees. In agriculture, certification may face even bigger obstacles. Brazilians buy most of the beef raised in the Amazon. Ethically-untroubled China is a huge market for soya. To succeed, the current profusion of proposals will have to be welded together by consensus, a process Mr Carter is more likely to influence than lead.

Much will depend on whether that consensus forms around encouraging producers or punishing them. Many greens think that it is meaningless to talk of sustainable soya or beef in the Amazon. If anything should be certified, it is that the stuff is being produced somewhere else, or on land deforested long ago. The proposed "Basel standards" endorsed by Coop, a big Swiss supermarket, would not bless soya from newly deforested areas, for instance. But Mr Carter, like all Amazonian agriculturalists, thinks that further deforestation is inevitable and that the 20% legal limit should be raised, at least in areas more fit for farming than conservation. Why should greens accept this? Because, he says, much could still be preserved, and without the co-operation of landowners "every tree is going to be cut down."

It takes a Texan

Mr Carter is an unlikely bridge builder. As a child in San Antonio he trapped mink and raccoon, selling their pelts for pocket money. In the army he dropped behind enemy lines in the first Gulf war. He views himself as a "pioneer" on a frontier with "so many parallels with the old West." Cattle losses to jaguars and rustlers, in this case Xavante Indians, are line items in the budget of his ranch. He indulges in a bit of Texas swagger, as if George Bush had not made it the world's least fashionable sub-culture.

His friends are hardly more appealing to greens. The environmental director of Grupo André Maggi, the world's biggest soya grower, co-founded Aliança da Terra. One of the

firm's owners, Blairo Maggi, is governor of Mato Grosso, where about half of last year's deforestation took place; Greenpeace, an NGO, has crowned him the "king of deforestation". Mr Maggi worries that as trade barriers fall Brazil's competitors will use such titles as an excuse to block imports. The answer, he thinks, is to produce "totally within the law," as his firm already does. His government has asked Mr Carter's group to develop criteria for certification.

Yet Mr Carter's allies are not all producers. The Brazilian head of The Nature Conservancy is on Aliança's board. IPAM, one of the main Amazonian research institutes, is its scientific partner. They are betting that as Brazilian agriculture becomes more corporate and internationally oriented it can be made to behave more responsibly. If not, the Amazon may be doomed.