

Brazil Burns Native Vegetation for Firewood Accelerating Desertification

Contributed by Milena Assis
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Brazil's Ministry of Environment (MMA) launched the primer, "Learning about the PAN-Brasil: the National Action Program to Combat Desertification and Mitigate the Effects of Drought."

The release of the booklet, which illustrates the progress that has been made and the challenges that remain to preserve the country's environment, was timed to mark World Day to Combat Desertification, commemorated on Saturday, June 17.

As a result of climatic changes and faulty utilization of natural resources, some regions in Brazil already contain desert areas. The nine Northeastern states, northern Minas Gerais, and part of Espírito Santo are the regions that require the most attention to cope with the consequences of severe environmental damage.

Brazil possesses the world's most densely inhabited areas vulnerable to desertification. 32 million people, roughly 20% of the country's population, live in these areas, which occupy 15.7% of the country's territory.

According to Cláudio Langone, executive secretary of the MMA, efforts have been underway since 2003 to check environmental degradation and make the population more aware of the perils of deforestation and incorrect use of the soil, which are the main causes of the desertification process.

He gave as an example the scrub forest ("caatinga"), where the native vegetation is used as firewood. "Therefore, we must seek energy alternatives for the low-income population not to burn wood from the native forests as fuel," Langone observed.

In his view, programs should be introduced to generate income, and alternatives should be sought in each state to decrease firewood use by the population.

"Stoves that use solar energy have been tested, and pilot projects from desertified regions could work here, if we had income generation programs permitting people to acquire these new technologies."

For the MMA's secretary of Water Resources, João Bosco Senra, the big challenge is to combine economic growth and the war on poverty with sustainable development. He said that the regions most vulnerable to desertification are the ones inhabited by low-income populations.

He informed that the MMA is engaged in a process of training, reorientation, and adequate soil and water management and in income improvement programs.

"Deforestation is frequently the income option for many people. If alternative energy sources, such as biofuel, are created in the community, the community will not have to resort to deforestation and the use of wood as a source of income," he explained.

Senra called for a union between states and municipalities, together with residents of the communities affected by the problem, to implement the National Plan to Combat Desertification.

"The primer is designed for children, adolescents, young people, and adults to learn about and understand the problem in their own region and the ways to minimize it."

The plan is to distribute more than 3,500 booklets in schools, universities, and communities in the regions most affected by desertification. The MMA also launched a series of postage stamps and rubber stamps to commemorate World Day to Combat Desertification.

In view of the large number of degraded areas around the world, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification proclaimed 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification and established June 17 as World Day to Combat Desertification.

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