
Brazil: The least publicised yet most endangered Atlantic Forest

It is worth noting that many people are not aware of the great diversity of ecosystems of the South American continent. Its great longitude and altitude variation, ranging from sea level to over 7000 metres, as well as its great variety of climates, enables the presence of diverse and different ecosystems, including the largest tropical rainforest (the Amazon Rainforest) and the planet's driest desert (Atacama desert).

This variety of ecosystems explains the generalised ignorance of what happens with the region's natural environment, with the exception of the Amazon rainforest. We would hence like to draw attention to the Atlantic Forest, whose very existence is highly threatened, and which is one of the richest in biodiversity.

The Atlantic Forest (Mata Atlantica) originally stretched all over the Brazilian coast, entering the continent and advancing into Argentina and Paraguay. Given its distribution along 23 degrees latitude south, and its diverse geography and climate, this biome is composed of different types of forests, including three forest types, as well as mangrove forests and xeromorphic coastal dune forests called the "Restinga".

In Brazil there is a strong movement for the protection and recovery of the Atlantic Forest: the Mata Atlântica NGO Network, which gathers more than 160 groups that actively work to influence public policies that affect this biome. Thanks to its work and with the support of the National Council of the Mata Atlantica Biosphere Reserve, a specific programme was created in 2001 for the recovery of the Atlantic Forest, as a sub-programme under the Pilot Programme for the Protection of Brazilian Tropical Rainforests.

In the 15th century, at the moment of the "discovery" of South America and Brazil, the Atlantic Forest covered a very large extension. The name Brazil comes from a tree known as "Palo Brasil". Brazil had nearly 15% of its territory covered by this forest (1.036 thousand square kilometres); today, only around 8% of that original cover remains standing. Striking as it may appear, the Atlantic Forest is much better preserved in Argentina (covering 3.500 sq.km) and Paraguay (10.000 sq.km), where this forest occupied a much smaller area than in Brazil. One of the causes of deforestation in Brazil has been the process of urbanization. At present, more than 100 million people live in the area which was originally occupied by the Atlantic Forest. The clearance of forest areas for agriculture was --and still is-- another cause of deforestation.

Despite being in the most densely populated region of the country, the Atlantic Forest ecosystem is poorly known and has been subject to little study: not until 1990 was the black-faced lion monkey identified. By the end of the 90's some studies revealed the existence of areas with up to 454 species of trees per hectare in a region in the South of Bahia (Brazilian Northeastern Region), which indicates that the Atlantic Forest holds the highest biodiversity of the planet. According to research carried out by Conservation International, the Atlantic Forest is among the 25 "hot spots" of the planet.

While the proximity of the Atlantic Forest to the big cities had once been one of the causes of its degradation, now it is also being a useful element for its preservation. Today, Brazilian people are increasingly aware of the importance of preserving this ecosystem, which, among other environmental services, is responsible for the supply of water for millions of people. At present, the forest is a source of income for many communities through the recovery and sustainable management of tropical plants (bromeliads and orchids) and fruits.

In Brazil, with the active participation of NGOs, local governments and the community, steps are being taken to revert this process of degradation. Stricter legislation, control and monitoring measures, as well as sensitization programmes, are already enabling the natural recovery of this forest, through the abandonment of agricultural fields established in inappropriate areas such as those bordering rivers and on the slopes of hills. It is to be expected that in a near future, the Atlantic Forest be treated and understood as one whole ecosystem in the three countries where it exists: Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Only through integrated measures adopted by all parties, will it be possible to recover all the exuberance of this forest and the benefits it provides for these countries and the planet.

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