



Kim Hendry hears news from the Amazon

People First

'Many environmentalists are more concerned about trees than people. In fact, they see humans as essentially the problem.' Susanna Hecht, a leading scholar of the Amazon, has caustic opinions of many of her colleagues: 'Their view of the forests as primal things - when in fact they've been moulded and shaped by human intervention - means their solutions have excluded people from the forest. They come up with proposals which may preserve the forests but in the end they are just as anti-human as a bulldozer.'

Born in the US to German socialist parents, Hecht has spent much of her professional life in the Amazon. In a new book with co-author Alexander Cockburn, **The Fate Of The Forest: Developers, Destroyers And Defenders Of The Amazon** (Verso, hbk £16.95), she demonstrates that the factors driving deforestation are internal to Brazil, and can be traced back to the 1964 US-sponsored military coup and the subsequent decision to open up the region to investment.

She explains: 'The generals had very strong geo-political concerns about the Amazon, from the national-security perspective. The Amazon is 60% of the national territory and borders eight countries. It's an area where the national boundaries have been redefined several times. They wanted to consolidate their borders. They also felt they needed to have a dynamic economy to avoid subversion - that familiar cold-war ideology.'

'Then there was this idea of manifest destiny: they were an illegitimate group and they required a national project. Their ambition was to "flood the Amazon with civilisation" - like many environmentalists, they saw it as empty.'

To ensure investment in the region, the military collaborated with business interests in the south on a series of huge fiscal incentives, which ultimately set off one of the wildest land booms in Brazilian history. Hecht explains, 'These were extraordinarily attractive. The rise in speculative value of the land - in

the state of Acre it was 2000% a year - began to take on a life of its own.'

'With everybody chasing land there was a lot of fraud over titles. The only way to claim land in this situation was to clear it to show what's called 'effective use', and that began to drive a lot of the deforestation. The cheapest way to get land from standing forest into so-called effective use is to throw a couple of grasses on it. So what you had was the expansion of livestock for speculative purposes. Whether it was productive or not was of little concern.'

Hecht spends several months each year in Brazil. She has worked extensively with indigenous and forest peoples - the Kayapo Indians, the rubber-tappers of Acre, peasant groups - and is one of a handful of progressive scientists who refuse to maintain an 'objective' relationship with the local community. She underlines the importance of studies of indigenous technologies in the vital task of elaborating solutions to new forms of regional development. 'There's no possible way that those of us from outside the tropics know how to manage this system. We just don't have the mental paradigms. The Indians and rubber-tappers view the forest in a completely different way - they're superior agriculturists. I want to emphasise that we're not talking about some Rousseauian fantasy of the noble savage here, these are people who have been involved in international markets for 500 years.'

A lot of Hecht's research has been on how these ancient and sophisticated systems work. 'There's no reason why one has to abandon so-called normal science when one is making radical arguments about land use. It's important to remember that rubber-tappers and Indians want a form of development that they can take advantage of. So these studies are necessary to give us baseline information about where points of intervention in the ecosystem might be. I use my knowledge essentially to



make the arguments for people who don't have scientists available to them, or perhaps can't make their arguments so effectively in scientific congresses.'

In 1989, almost 50,000 square kilometres of the Brazilian rainforest were bulldozed and burnt - part of the continuing holocaust that has, since the early 1970s, destroyed 10-15% of the world's largest rainforest. In the West, Brazil's destruction of its ecosystem has been primarily viewed as an environmental catastrophe, with grim reverberations for the rest of the world: the greenhouse effect and the incineration of our genetic heritage. The social consequences for forest people, who have made their living from their forest habitat created by the forest for hundreds, and in the case of the Indians, thousands of years, are also framed in these terms rather than as labour struggles.

According to Hecht: 'In the US we're treated to this version of Chico Mendes as St Francis of the forest - when he was a radical labour leader - and the rubber-tappers as these people who really love trees. It is, in fact, a pitched battle against large landowners who are destroying the livelihood of landless rural peoples. The battle revolves around control of access and resources, which happen to be the trees.' Hecht and Cockburn stress the environmental issues can't be separated from the struggle for social justice: 'Broadly speaking, the population's lives are linked to that of the forest,' says Hecht.

The Fate Of The Forest is the first history of the Amazon, which draws together its geological, social and mythological strands. From the blood-soaked trail of extermination, dispossession and enslavement of the aboriginal Americans, to the 19th-century rubber boom. It combines Hecht's original research with Cockburn's historical eye and literacy, keeping an unusually successful balance between the academic and the popular. The book chronicles the region's long hi-

story of oppression and resistance, providing an understanding of the present convulsions, which have a firm class and economic basis.

In the past decade, the Indians and the rubber-tappers have begun to organise themselves, acquiring increasing political strength and visibility. Broad alliances are being created: in 1987 the Forest People's Alliance drew in groups from all over the Amazon, many of whom, like the rubber-tappers and Indians, were overcoming generations of enmity. The fact that this activism has been carried out in such a violent context, with landowners' organisations, for example, hiring death squads, makes their achievements all the more remarkable.

In 1988, the first 'extractive reserve', Sao Luis de Remanso, was established in Acre. The idea of extractive reserves forms the core of the rubber-tappers' alternative vision of regional development: agrarian reform for forest peoples and their demands for much greater local participation. It assures the rights of those who are able to carry out sustainable exploitation of the forest's resources - like rubber, nuts and fish. Huge tracts of land are taken out of the market and divided into individual plots - *colocacao* - for the rubber-tapper's family, on a free long-term lease. The family can move or sell their area, but it must be done with the agreement of their neighbours. 'It's the socialisation of the means of production - in this case, land and forest resources - and a restructuring of the market system in a collective form,' affirms Hecht. 'It's not just about getting land, it's also about diversifying their economies and modifying market structures.' Above all it is a labour struggle, a struggle for land, with important ecological implications. 'The fate of the forest will be played off at a political level. If you want the forests to stand, you have to support the social movements in Brazil that are in favour of this.' •



Amazon rainforests: People and trees under threat

A Forest Library

Fight For The Forest

(Latin America Bureau, 1989). The first and currently only book on Brazilian eco-martyr Chico Mendes. Combining interview with analysis it reveals both the political and environmental factors behind the life-or-death struggle for the forest's future.

The Rainforests: A Celebration

(Harrie & Jenkins, 1989). Edited by Lisa Silcock, this visual celebration of the rainforests' beauty and variety attempts to clarify why the forests are so vital to our existence. Up-to-date contributions from David Bellamy and Chilean Prance, Director of Kew Gardens.

The Enchanted Canopy - Secrets From The Rainforest Roof

(Collins, 1989). Arboreal naturalists are discovering treetop plants and animals whose existence until recently was not just unknown but unsuspected. The realm of gliding snakes and flying frogs is the setting for Andrew Mitchell's personal journey and celebration of the rainforest.

Amazon: The Flooded Forest (BBC, 1989). Michael Goulding's natural history of the river and its floodplain also examines the severe threat to the already precarious ecolo-

gical balance of the Amazon from the Brazilian government's deforestation policy.

The Death Of Trees

(Pluto, 1985). Nigel Dudley covers the complex and important problem of forest abuse worldwide - tropical, subtropical and temperate. A comprehensive guide expressing an urgency that is appropriate to the scale of the problem.

Turning Up The Heat

(Paladin, 1989). Fred Pearce argues the need for global management of the life-support systems of our planet. Drawing on research into the meteorological effects of rainforest diminution, he suggests that we have been affecting the earth's climate for millenia without ever realising it.

Exploited Earth - Britain's Aid And The Environment

(Earthscan, 1989). In her book, commissioned by Friends of the Earth, Teresa Hayter describes the different forms of aid and their effects, paying particular attention to the world's forests. Her conclusion that aid from the West, as currently practised, probably has negative effects on the forests and poor of the Third World, leads her to make several radical proposals to reverse this state of affairs. •

Greg Kent