

Deforestation in Venezuela surges as gold miners ransack the Amazon

The loss of pristine forest is estimated to be increasing by around 170 per cent annually in Venezuela - an even faster rate than Brazil - as a result of a state-sanctioned boom in gold mining

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By [Luke Taylor](#)



A gold mine in Bolivar state in the south of Venezuela
JORGE SILVA/REUTERS/Alamy

The destruction of the Amazon rainforest is accelerating faster in Venezuela than in any other country, spurred by a state-sanctioned boom in gold mining.

“No one is seeing this destruction because it’s happening so fast that it’s impossible to measure,” says Alejandro Álvarez Iragorry, the coordinator of Clima21, an NGO that promotes environmental human rights in Venezuela. “The environmental damage and the speed with which it’s happening is disastrous.”

Around 63 per cent of Venezuela's land is covered by natural forest and it is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world.

Calculating the precise amount of forest lost in the Venezuelan Amazon is impossible as the government hasn't released deforestation data since 2016 and prohibits journalists from reporting in the Amazon.

Álvarez Irigaray and his colleagues analysed data from Global Forest Watch, which monitors forest loss with satellite imagery, and SOS Orinoco, which tracks the damage caused by mining in Venezuela. They estimate that between 2001 and 2015, an average of 97,258 hectares were lost each year. [That figure rose to 157,307 hectares between 2016 and 2020.](#)

The increase is higher still for pristine forest. Deforestation had been largely isolated to northern Venezuela until 2010, but the explosion in gold mining means the phenomenon is now concentrated in the Amazon, where the amount of forest lost in the past five years is equivalent to that cleared in the previous 15 years. Venezuela's ongoing humanitarian crisis is also forcing people to clear forest for agriculture and firewood.

The researchers estimate that the loss of pristine forest is increasing by around 170 per cent annually — the highest rate in South America.

The Venezuelan government says that [deforestation has dropped 47 per cent in the past 20 years](#), a figure that researchers inside and outside the country contest. The Venezuelan government didn't respond to requests for comment.

Much of the environmental damage is occurring in the Orinoco Mining Arc: a 110,000-square-kilometre zone of dense, mostly Amazonian rainforest created in 2014 to generate mining revenue when the country's economy collapsed.

The zone was supposed to help regulate the removal of gold, but mining operations run by armed groups are spreading quickly beyond its limits, says Cristina Burelli, founder of the environmental advocacy group SOS Orinoco. "The regime is aiding and abetting illegal mining in extremely pristine, delicate and vulnerable areas," she says.

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Venezuela has more illegal mines in the Amazon than any other country, with [1423 illegal sites](#) recorded in 2020 by the Amazon Network of Georeferenced Socio-Environmental Information. This is probably an underestimate as small-scale operations are hard to spot by satellite, says Álvarez Irigaray.

The environmental damage goes beyond the trees cleared to make way for extracting precious metals. Mining leads to the construction of roads for transport and cattle ranches to supply

food. The mercury used to separate gold from sediment is also poisoning rivers, while dredging up the soil leaves lagoons of stagnant water that become breeding sites for malaria.

The prevalence of malaria is four to eight times higher in Venezuela's mining regions than the rest of the country, [a study found in 2021](#). The country records around half of all malaria cases registered in Latin America and the ongoing economic crisis means it is transmitting the infectious disease to the rest of the continent, with 7 million refugees having fled the country in recent years.

Unlike Brazil and Colombia, where recently elected leaders are promising to halt accelerating deforestation, the Venezuelan government has shown no intention of clamping down on mining, says Álvarez Irigorry. Nor does the country host free and fair elections, giving conservationists little hope of stopping the trend.

“It looks like we are going to continue destroying the rainforest until we leave irreversible damage,” he says.

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