

Worse-than-anticipated deforestation jolts Brazil

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Brazil's Amazon deforestation rate for Aug. 2003 through July 2004 ran an estimated 6% higher than during the previous 12-month period, officials here say, a result that has surprised the government and fueled harsh criticism here and abroad.

Unveiled May 18, the estimates have undermined confidence in forest-conservation initiatives launched by the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in March of last year. Amid the fallout, the government has pledged to boost forest protection in Mato Grosso and Rondônia, two of the Brazilian Amazon states where deforestation is heaviest.

As if to demonstrate renewed resolve, the government recently announced it had broken a major Amazon illegal-logging ring that includ-

ed both the federal and state environmental enforcement chiefs for Mato Grosso.

The preliminary deforestation figures, to be updated with final results by the end of the year, show an estimated 10,080 square miles (26,130 sq. kms) of Amazon rainforest were cleared from Aug. 1, 2003 through July 31, 2004, an area larger than the U.S. state of Maryland. That would rank as the second-highest deforestation rate since the government began issuing such figures in 1989.

Experts say 262,252 square miles (679,240 sq kms), or nearly 17%, of Brazil's Amazon rainforest have been destroyed since European settlement of the region began. That's an area larger than the U.S. state of Texas.

continued on page 9 ♦

Blue-whale park proposed for waters off Chiloé

Valdivia, Chile

Eight years ago, when the International Whaling Commission (IWC) paid US\$2 million for two ships to count blue whales off Chile's coast, the observers spotted just 45 of the world's largest mammal over a period of one and a half months.

But when the expedition had ended and

Gaete, vowed to return to conduct an extensive study of the area. By 2002 he had secured the necessary support from the Southern University of Valdivia and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), a leading U.S.-based conservation institution.

Then, during the four-month study,



some of the scientists were riding a ferry boat up the Patagonian coast to catch a plane from the Chilean coastal city of Puerto Montt, they came across a startling sight. In the span of just four hours, they saw more than 60 blue whales (*balaenoptera musculus*) while crossing the Gulf of Corcovado east of Chiloé Island.

One of the scientists, Rodrigo Hucke-

Hucke-Gaete, a marine mammal ecologist and director of the Blue Whale Center, a non-governmental research group headquartered in the southern coastal city of Valdivia, spotted 153 blue whales and made another important find. In a portion of the Gulf of Corcovado between Chiloé Island and the northern Patagonian

continued on page 10 ♦

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Vol. 7 - No. 8

Inside

Around the region

2

National parks next target in Colombia for coca fumigation

3

OECD recommends new environmental initiatives in Chile

4

Biofuels legislation being prepared in Argentine Congress

5

CENTERPIECE:

In Peruvian reserve, Brazil-nut harvests become a force for forest conservation

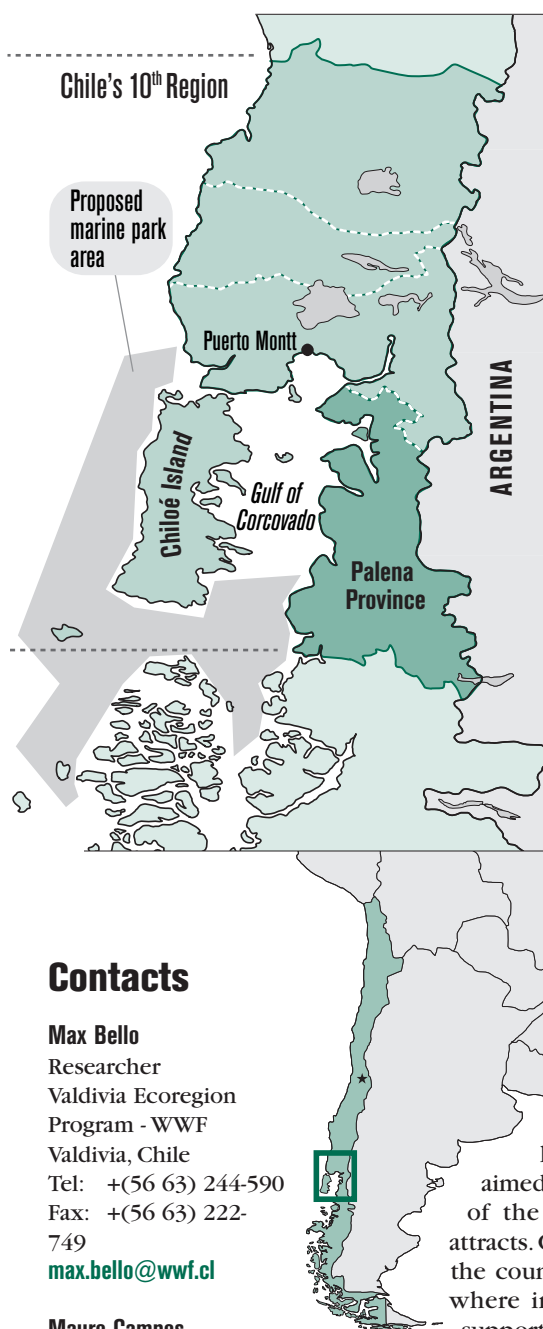
6

Q&A:

Biodiversity expert describes impacts of Colombia's aerial coca-crop spraying

12

Blue whales continued from page 1



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province known as Palena, he and other scientists spotted 11 mother blue whales accompanied by calves.

The findings challenged two standard scientific assumptions concerning the blue whale, an endangered species estimated to number just 1,700 in the Southern Hemisphere.

The first was that the whales remain 20 to 50 miles at sea. The Chilean study showed they come within 150 meters of shore on the continental side of the Gulf of Corcovado, which also is frequented by other whale species.

A second long-held theory was that in the Southern Hemisphere, the whales migrate to Antarctica to feed and travel to the tropics to breed. In the mid-latitude Gulf of Corcovado, however, they were found to be breeding and feeding during both summer and winter seasons.

Says Hucke-Gaete: "This just shows once more that science has tons more to learn about the blue whales."

Park proposal eyed

The new evidence of the Gulf of Corcovado's importance to blue whales has produced momentum to make the whale habitat into a marine park, a move aimed at ensuring study and protection of the water body and the whales it attracts. Chile's government, which created the country's first two marine parks elsewhere in the country last year, strongly supports the proposal.

Conama, Chile's national environmental agency, was scheduled this month to present the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) with a proposal for a three-year, US\$650,000 project to step up research of the blue whale's movements in the area and to identify threats to the animals.

The studies would be used to help determine how a multiple-use marine park could balance whale protection, ecotourism and the livelihood of fishermen on Chiloé Island. The project also would call for the development of public-education programs centering on the whales and the drafting of a long-term ecotourism plan for the region.

"This project will involve everyone," says Mauro Campos of Corema, the regional environmental authority for Chile's 10th Region. "We will teach locals, for example, not to put trash in the sea, or inform fishing-boat operators how they can earn money in ecotourism. It will also involve local environmental groups, universities, town halls, tourism agencies, the media, many different sectors of society."

The project also hopes to involve two neighbors of the proposed marine park: U.S. clothing entrepreneur Douglas Tompkins and Sebastian Piñera, a center-right Chilean politician and the owner of LanChile Airlines.

In 2003, Piñera bought up 320,000 acres (130,000 has) of land on the southern portion of Chiloé Island and since has been developing a private nature park. He has done so drawing on advice from Tompkins, who on the north Patagonian mainland has created the enormous 740,000-acre (300,000-ha) Pumalín park—a private reserve stretching from the coast to Chile's Andean border with Argentina. Tompkins also has extensive holdings south of Pumalín on the continental side of the proposed marine park, across from Chiloé Island.

Help from Tompkins, Piñera?

In early April, Campos and other government officials met with both Tompkins and Piñera to begin discussing how the pair could assist the marine park project. Both men publicly agreed to participate, though their exact future contributions, other than advice, are still not clear, says Carolina Morgado, a spokesperson for Tompkins.

Piñera pledges that at the very least, the land encompassing his nature park would be available to support the marine-park effort. "We are interested in this, to help attract tourists where they can come to see, visit, know and study this wonderful animal," he says.

So far, the park idea has been well-received by the public at large, says Max Bello, a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) researcher at the group's Valdivia office. But Bello notes that the political winds can always shift, pointing out that in December the nation will go to the polls to elect a new president.

That's why environmental groups are pushing to have the area declared a marine park before the center-left administration of President Ricardo Lagos leaves office next March. Says Bello: "We don't want to create a lot of expectations about the ecotourism potential, but we do think a multiple-use park can be formed to satisfy the blue whale's needs and the needs of people who live nearby."

—James Langman