

The Green Cathedral: Sustainable Development of Amazonia

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de Onis, Juan. *The Green Cathedral: Sustainable Development of Amazonia. (A Twentieth Century Fund Book)*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. 280 pp. Illustrations. US\$24.95 hardcover ISBN: 0-19-507460-2.

During the 1980s 400,000 square kilometers of tropical forest were cleared in Brazil, in ways that have shocked the world. A particularly striking passage of this important book describes a train ride through an area in which the forest had been cut and burned as far as the eye could see. The passengers, the author flatly notes, seemed unconcerned about the view, which resembled a bombed-out battlefield, but instead talked confidently about what they were doing on the frontier. On the brighter side, ninety percent of the forests still remain; but it remains to be seen what will become of them.

Juan de Onis suggests that, as a result of a combination of international pressure (much resented), local activism, more enlightened government policies, and lessons learned the hard way, the past "decade of destruction" may not be repeated. Provided that thorough zoning of forest preserves can be carried out, future harm to the forest and its native inhabitants can be minimized. Development will continue, though, and the realistic choice he sees is between sustainable and unsustainable development of the region. An instance of waste represented by the latter is the activity of the "shifting agriculturalists, who destroy the forest to eat, like locusts, because they don't have a sustainable method of production" (p. 227).

Along with concern for the environment, de Onis expresses commitment to human welfare and modern civilization; he notes that even the native forest peoples in many instances welcome acculturation. "Amazonia needs profit centers as much as prophets of ecological doom... The last thing Amazonians want is an economic moratorium based on a utopian preservation of the region" (p. 246). In any case, he sees it as unlikely that modern people will adopt the traditional ways of forest dwellers. They can, though, at least learn to plant food for cattle that enriches rather than depletes the soil. (Kudzu is an example of a plant that is beneficial in this context.) And they can stop the massive water pollution resulting from the extraction of gold with mercury. Reforestation can be practiced. For their part, traditional gatherers of rubber and nuts may have to change to modern methods.

Author also of *The Alliance That Lost Its Way*, Juan de Onis was a correspondent and bureau chief, in Rio de Janeiro, for the New York Times for twenty-three years. He presently lives in Chile on a fruit farm and works with an ecological institute named IPHAE. In his superlative reporting he strives to be dispassionate, objective, and balanced. The present book is very strong on specifics, is highly informative, and contains considerable narrative and some personal accounts. Based on two years of travel and interviews of homesteaders, ranchers, Indians, activists, government officials and others, it includes accounts of the history, economics and politics of the Amazon region. Attitudes and behavior on the frontier are described, as are the importance of rubber, gold, tin, cattle ranching, timber, hydroelectric power and Brazil nuts.

Political realities are shown to be governed in part by the inefficiency and fiscal limitations of bureaucrats who fail to consult and involve people in the formation of policies that concern them.

Some readers may find this book slow going, but because of the importance of the subject and the vivid, informative nature of the treatment it is recommended for all academic and public libraries.