

# Making Ecologists See Red

Amazonas' controversial governor, **GILBERTO MESTRINHO**, says he values the lives of people more than those of animals and plants

By JOHN MAIER JR. MANAUS

*Gilberto Mestrinho, 63, is the governor of the Brazilian state of Amazonas—and an environmentalist's nightmare. He advocates the extraction of minerals and timber and the hunting of the jacare, the Amazonian alligator. He castigates outsiders who, he says, have no business telling Brazil what to do about its flora and fauna. He has proposed the so-called Amazonian Code, laws that, if approved, would transfer environmental control of the Amazon from the federal government to the nine states of the region; other governors in the Amazon region have not supported his proposal. Though despised by ecologists, he is immensely popular among the voters: first elected in 1959, he is the only Brazilian governor to have served three terms in the same state.*

**Q. What prompted the Amazonian Code?**

**A.** When you have a nation as large as Brazil, with so many diverse areas, you can't group the whole country under one general environmental code. What's true in the south or in the coastal states is not necessarily true here in the Amazon, so it makes sense that each state determine its own environmental policy.

**Q. The proposal was harshly criticized. Not all the Amazon governors supported it.**

**A.** Some were afraid the federal government would withhold funds from their states if they publicly endorsed it. For me the most important thing is not the government's money, but to create a policy that improves the lives of the Amazon people.

**Q. One governor warned of the region's becoming an "empire of the chain saw" because you supported giving chain saws to settlers.**

**A.** I never once gave a chain saw to anybody. That was the previous governor. But I don't think it's wrong. People living in cities use computers. They travel by cars and airplanes, not horses. Why should somebody living in the forest be expected to use an ax if he can use a chain saw? Why should we be expected to live in the Stone Age while the rest of the world moves forward?

**Q. In order to improve the quality of life in the Amazon, you have to develop it?**

**A.** Of course, but we plan to do so in a rational way. The problem is that anytime somebody talks about doing anything at all in the Amazon, there is this wild hysteria from the rest of the world and from certain sectors in Brazil telling us we can't cut down a tree. The fact is, the Amazon is the least destroyed place in the world. Since the arrival of the Europeans some 500 years ago, only 8.5% of the Amazon has been deforested. In my state of Amazonas, only 1.24% has been deforested. These are the facts. And the people here are living in misery, but nobody cares about them. All you hear is "Save the Amazon, save the animals." Environmentalists care more about trees and monkeys than people. It's absurd. I have my priorities straight. I value the lives of people more than those of animals and plants. Only after we have improved the lives of humans can we begin thinking of the fauna and flora. Those who disagree with me are against humanity.

**Q. How can you be sure that your plans of rational development will benefit the residents of the forest and at the same time preserve the Amazon?**

**A.** First, I'm a conservationist, not a preservationist. The Amazon is not a museum—as many foreigners want it to be. There are almost 17 million people living in the Brazilian part alone, and you can't expect them not to interact with their surroundings. We are not monkeys in a zoo. But we can develop the Amazon while conserving it. It is vast and can accommodate many different types of activities, including the controlled exploration of minerals and wood.

Developed nations, which have used their resources to become rich, now expect us to live in misery. The Amazon has one of the richest mineral deposits in the world. A mine causes very little destruction to the environment but can bring in lots of revenue to the state. The same with timber, if done properly through forest management, where only the valuable hardwoods are taken out and seedlings are replanted. But we are not even allowed to export logs.

**Q. Why not?**

**A.** For the same reason we're not allowed to sell jacare skins or explore new mineral deposits. Foreign companies control these multibillion-dollar businesses, and they don't want to lose their share in the markets. Through their governments, they apply tremendous pressure on the Brazilian government, which is forced to comply with their wishes. Americans and Canadians tell us we can't touch the forest, but they are the largest exporters of logs in the world. Almost every country in the world allows for a hunting season, but in Brazil it is prohibited to kill any wild animal or market its skin. In the western part of the Amazon, there is now a superpopulation of giant jacares that are eating all the fish and threatening the locals. Hundreds of *caboclos* [mestizos] have been mutilated and even killed over the years, but they are not allowed to touch the jacares. If a jacare kills somebody, nobody says anything. But if a man kills a jacare, it is a criminal offense. We're not advocating wiping out jacares, but environmentalists know that populations need to be controlled. That's why even in Florida and Louisiana, where there are much smaller alligator populations, they have hunting seasons. People hunt deer and other wild game in





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**Q. What about the gold prospectors?**

**A.** *Garimpeiros* are nomads who pollute the rivers with mercury and destroy the forests. There are tens of thousands of them roaming around, and nobody has any control over them. I have never supported them, just as I never supported cattle ranchers. Certain activities, such as cattle ranching, are not conducive to the Amazon because of the soil. Gold mining works, but it must be done properly; that is to say, with companies and organized mines that can be controlled.

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Europe, Asia, North America, and nobody says anything. Even Prince Charles, who goes around the world telling everybody to save the Amazon, has hunted.

**Q. What of your accusation that ecology groups are controlled by outside interests?**

**A.** Most environmental groups are defending economic interests, not nature. They are being used by multinationals and cartels to prevent us and other Third World nations from cutting into the developed world’s profits. It was only in the ’60s and ’70s, when Brazil began to explore the natural resources of the Amazon and foreigners saw that we could extract the resources at a very low cost, that the whole campaign to preserve the Amazon began. We weren’t destroying the forests; they know that. But we were threatening foreign businesses. They continue to fabricate stories and exaggerate the facts, say we are torching the Amazon, that there will be a greenhouse effect. The truth is, the amount of carbon dioxide released from forest fires is insignificant, while the more than 500 million motor vehicles of the world emit 56% of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

**Q. Why do you oppose the creation of so-called extractive reserves, where rubber tappers and Indians can use the land to win a living?**

**A.** Have you ever seen the conditions of the people living on an extractive reserve? They live in complete poverty, like slum dwellers in the cities. Ecologists who support extractive reserves are sadists; they are condemning the rubber tappers to eternal misery. Ask tappers or Indians what they would rather do, and they’ll tell you they’d rather work in factories or mines and make money. That’s why so many are leaving the forests.

**Q. A few years ago, gold was discovered in a Yanomami reservation in the state of Roraima. What would you do if such a find were made in a national park or on an Indian reserve in your state?**

**A.** I would let the Indians decide what they wanted to do, but you’ll find they’ll all want to mine the gold. I’m all for Indian reserves, but we have to be reasonable. Supporters of the Yanomami want to create a continuous reserve totaling 9.4 million hectares. But there are only 3,600 Yanomami, so that’s 2,611 hectares for each Yanomami. That’s crazy. [Editor’s note: Most anthropologists claim there are between 9,000 and 10,000 Yanomami.]

**Q. Anthropologists say the Yanomami, as wanderers, need vast areas to survive.**

**A.** No matter how much they roam, no Indian requires 2,600 hectares in order to survive. If the Yanomami had roads and access to Jeeps, they could drive their whole lives and never cover that much ground. Brazil allots an average of 900 hectares per Indian. Show me one other country that does that.

**Q. Do you support debt-for-nature swaps or funding from international governments and groups for environmental projects?**

**A.** Sure, as long as the projects will help improve the living standards of my people. But it is only fair that we Brazilians decide how the money should be used. Every year you have American and foreign politicians telling us what we can and can’t do with the Amazon. Can you imagine a group of Brazilian Senators telling President Bush what to do with the forests in California or Alaska? The Amazon is not a world monument. It belongs to Brazil, and it is up to us to decide its future. ■