

Back from the brink of eco-catastrophe

Author : Terence Wood

Date : November 12, 2013

It meanders and bifurcates like a grand tropical river, but [this](#) podcast talk by Professor Susanna Hecht is fascinating for one simple point: since 2000 the rate of deforestation in the Amazon (and more broadly through much of Latin America) has fallen precipitously. What had once seemed like untrammelled eco-catastrophe is now starting to look like a surprise good news story.

As Professor Hecht makes clear in her talk there is no single explanation for the changing fate of Latin America's forests, rather their revival appears to be the result of an interplay of different processes including:

1. Democratisation and the new constitutions that came with it, which have afforded more power to traditional owners of forested land, and which have also provided greater space for protest and legal redress.
2. The declining value of corn and other crops that had been grown on deforested land in parts of Latin America (this decline stemming in part from trade agreements which have brought inflows of cheaper north American corn).
3. The rise of alternative forest friendly crops (types of coffee, the Acai berry and others).
4. Increased urban migration.
5. The rise of social safety nets.
6. Externally funded forest preservation schemes (where donors and NGOs have, through various mechanisms, paid to have tracts of forest left unfelled).
7. Reforestation in some areas.

None of these have been unqualified successes and it is frustratingly hard from the talk to get any sense of their relative impact or the trade-offs involved. Yet it is still a fascinating listen -- an interesting tale of the complex processes that bring positive change.