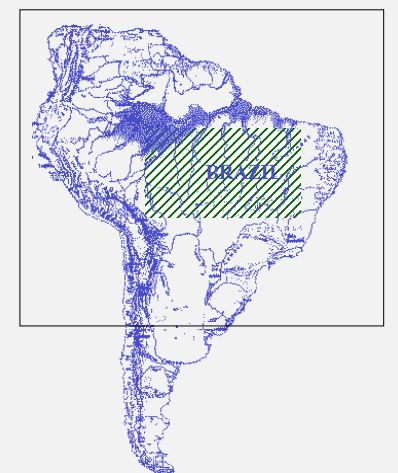




SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION: THE TRANSAMAZONIC HIGHWAY

A *n empty forest would be land without
men for men without land.*

— Garrastazu Medici,
president of Brazil, 1970



Twenty-five years ago someone drew an almost straight line across a map of Brazil's Amazon jungle and called it the Transamazonic Highway. Ten thousand men armed with little more than axes went into the forest and cut a path three-hundred feet wide and three-thousand miles long. They did it with their bare hands. The trees were enormous. Some reached into the sky over two hundred feet and grew thirty feet in diameter. It took only two years to chop down what took Nature millenniums to grow.

Then the yellow bulldozers came. They roared and belched diesel smoke everywhere. At first, the Indians thought they were living beasts, so they attacked with bows and arrows. It didn't do any good and the yellow giants kept coming, kept pushing the road ahead three kilometers a day. They carved a deep scar across the land which oozed red mud. It looked as though the forest was actually bleeding.

The dream of conquering the Amazon galvanized the whole nation. Three million square miles of forest, rivers and natural resources lay waiting for the taking, and nothing could keep Brazil from claiming her destiny.

Most everyone was convinced that this two lane, hard-packed dirt highway would unite all of Brazil in its struggle to enter the twenty first century as a power to be reckoned with.

But the critics said the road would only connect "*nothing with nowhere.*"



“The Transamazonic Highway connects nothing with nowhere.”
—Brazilian ecologist, Altamira, 1972



In the beginning it was just a muddy road. A scar cut into the living jungle. In the end, it will bring with it the best and the worst of civilization. Adventurers, prospectors, scientists, soldiers, prostitutes, farmers, woodcutters, cattle ranchers, hired guns, explorers, teachers, the rich, the poor, the hopeful, the disenfranchised, and all manner of fortune-seekers — all traveling a road through God's Green Hell in search of a better life.

— Diary entry, Itaituba-Jacareacanga Stretch, 1972

The driver wrenched at the controls of the mammoth yellow bulldozer. It lurched forward spewing arcane smoke from its exhaust. The blade smashed into the huge plank-buttressed forest giant whose trunk measured six men 'round with outstretched arms. It was a sight to see, a Promethean rising majestically into the humid, dull-green canopy almost two hundred feet above our heads. The steel blade cut deep, leaving a dark gash which exposed the glistening white wood beneath the smooth, light-colored bark.

The tree trembled and bits of bark rained down, followed by large green leaves which waffled toward us from the upper canopy. The bulldozer roared louder, its mud-filled treads churning at the red earth as it pushed and shoved with dogged determination. The tree shuddered, then began falling backwards slowly. The ground shook as its massive roots tore through the shallow subsoil, ripping up millennium of rotting humus. The jungle erupted with the sound of wood splitting and exploding as the colossal arching branches swept through the canopy and surrounding treetops, colliding with lesser trees, pulling and smashing down everything in its path. The earth shook as the tree hit it with a gruesome thud.

The guttural howling sounds of frightened *Guariba monkeys* could be heard in the distance as they skittered through the tree-tops, then disappeared. A single screaming *Piha* glided by and shrieked its displeasure.

“Wee-weeeeeeeee-pee-ee-o, Wee-weeeeeeeee-pee-ee-o” in shrill and uneven whistles.

The iridescent blue wings of the *Morpho* butterfly, which sailed everywhere in the jungle, was no-where to be seen. Except for the muted metallic grumbling of the bulldozer, the jungle was deathly still.

This was the *Linha da Frente*, The Front Line.

In a very real sense, it was the End of the Line on the Transamazonian Highway.





This morning I sipped the coffee out of my cup very carefully, to make sure nothing was floating around inside, dead or alive. They make the coffee with water taken from the nearby stream. They strain it through a cheese-cloth, but the same stream serves as a laundromat, barbershop and bathroom. Men shave, bathe and piss in it constantly. I hope the coffee was strong enough to kill anything which might have gotten through the cheese-cloth.

— Diary entry, *The Front Line Construction camp, between Itaituba and Jacareacanga, November 1972*



The most dangerous beast in the forest is the white man. Only the white man kills you for a pack of cigarettes. I sleep alone, far from their camp. They make noise and scare the birds away. They wear clothes all the time, so they stink. If you stink, you can't hunt. It scares the animals away.

— Conversations with a Kayapo Indian boy, a guide for the Front Line construction crew. *Diary entry 1972*





*O*n a map, it was only a thin blue line. In the imagination of men, it was the road to the Promise Land. In reality it was the route to immeasurable devastation. Verdant forest, pristine rivers, unknown species of plant and animal life, whole populations of natives, families, cultures and traditional values are being lost along the way.

In ten years a million settlers migrated from the south looking for a new life in the Amazon. Families without land, without work, without hope, came to the new frontier to begin again. Small towns like Itaituba, Altamira, Jacareacanga, and Humaita exploded and became centers of commerce overnight. Whole tracts of land were burned and cleared and Agrovilas, or agricultural mini-cities, were built for the colonists. It was the Wild, Wild, West of Brazil, where a man could go from rags to riches overnight. All he needed was a little luck, a lot of courage, and a place to call his own.

— Diary entry, *The Front Line*, 1972



*T*he Brazilian military leaders view the Amazon as a way to solve two different and unrelated problems: National security and abject poverty. They're killing two birds with one stone by transplanting thousands of itinerant farmers, starving families, and colonists from the south and the deserts of the Nordeste, into a jungle whose average rainfall was over 100 inches. A whole disenfranchised population from the south migrating north to the jungle in search of a better life. An empty forest would be, in the words of General Emilio Garrastazu Medici, the president of Brazil, "a land without men for men without land." I think it will be more like a land without promise for men without hope.

— Diary entry, *The Front Line* between Itaituba and Jacareacanga, 1972



The Government is giving everyone a plot of land, a small house, tools, a yearly stipend, an interest-free loan and enough seed to plant the first two years of crops. Where there was once only forest now stand little Agrovilas, or agrarian communities of neat, white, three-room wooden houses lined up along unpaved streets. Each community has a school, a makeshift infirmary, a storehouse, and if they're lucky, a church. Co-ops are being created to distribute crops among the people. These isolated, little towns appear along the road every 100 kilometers with a single homestead every half kilometer on either side of the road in between.

— Diary Entry, 1972, Brasil Novo, an agrovila 54 Km West of Altamira





The first two years of crops were poor. I spent most of my time clearing the land. I had little time left for planting. Next year should be better. After all, I've got two years of hard experience behind me. It's a hard life, but a good one. It's my own to do what I want.

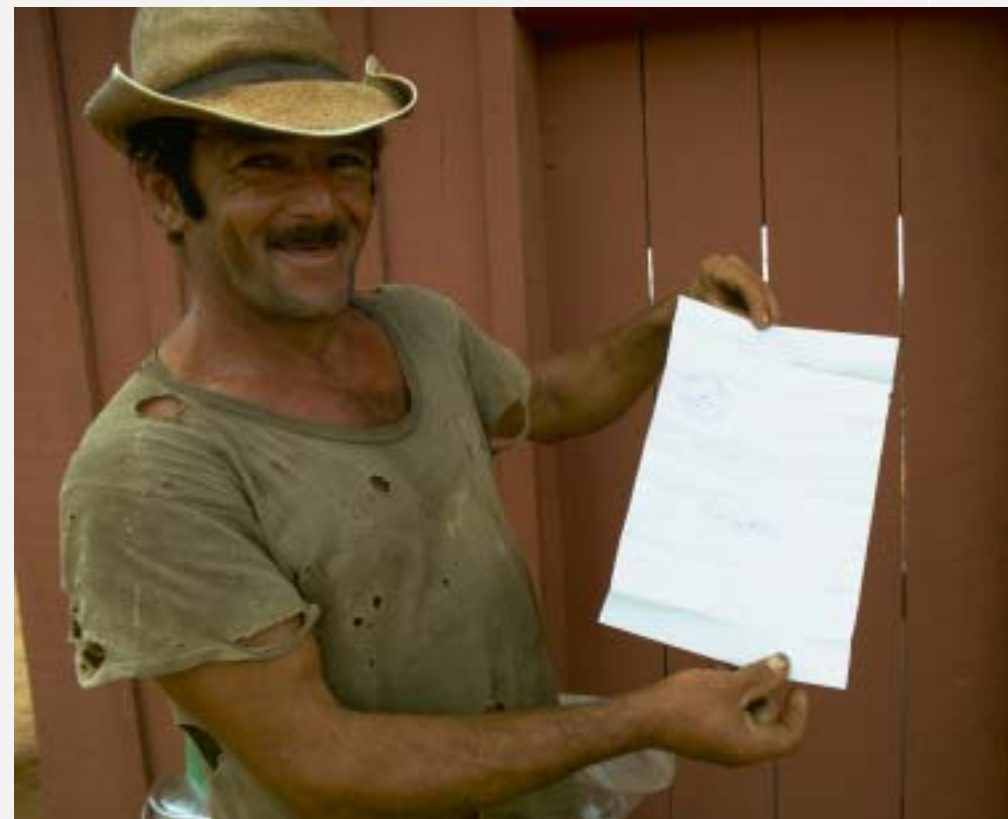
— Adao Merois de Rosa, known as Patria Amada, the first colonist on the Transamazonic Highway, near Posto 54, Altamira, Para (1972)





*T*oday I met the first colonist on the Transamazonian highway. His name is Adoao Merois da Rosa, but everyone calls him "Patria Amada", or The One Who Loves His Country. He and his wife walked 1200 miles from Rio Grande do Sul to the capitol of Brazilia to ask President Medici to give them a plot of land along the Transamazonian highway so they could begin a new life. He had a deed to prove it, too. Signed by the president of Brazil. They got their wish and Brazil got a hero.

— Diary Entry, July 29, 1972
Serraria Km 46, West of Altamira



“**A**mazonia - Integrar para nao entregar.” (The Amazon - Use it or lose it.)

— Motto on colonist's T-shirt,
Front Line Construction camp, near
Jacareacanga, Para', 1972



“*With God
I will win*”

— *Bumper sticker on truck at
Hotel Altamira,
Altamira, 1972*



In 1971, when the Transamazonian Highway reached Humaita', a hundred people a day came to Ji-Parana'. They brought a lot of children, hope, and malaria with them. The place has never been the same since.

— *Padre Marquese de Silva, Missionary, Ji-Parana', Rondonia*



I had ten children. But five died before they reached puberty. Life is hard here, but we have hope.

— *Colonist, Brasil Novo Agrovila, Transamazonian highway, 1972*

Over the next ten years engineers drowned millions of acres of virgin forest behind huge hydroelectric dams and lit up whole areas of the jungle. Politicians and prospectors uprooted various Indian tribes and discussed the merits of *integration*. Thousands of lives were lost to malaria, yellow fever, typhus, diarrhea and other diseases while thousands more were displaced by economic hardships. An area the size of Belgium was cut or burned down for the sake of cocoa and cattle. Innumerable, yet undiscovered, species of flora and fauna were decimated and the skies filled with clouds of arcane smoke. Many said that this was progress and a price had to be paid. Others said it was a crime against Nature. Most agreed that it was madness, but the seeds of destruction had already been planted.

Within ten years after cutting down the first tree, the Transamazonic highway was almost non-existent, most of it washed away by torrential rains, or taken back by the jungle. The agrovilas were practically empty, some totally abandoned. The soils, leached by tropical rains, stopped producing crops. Government subsidies ended and life got worse. In the end, thousands of homesteaders abandoned the land. The great socio-agrarian experiment was an indisputable failure and men looked for other ways to exploit the land, other ways to survive. Many went to the cities looking for work. Many more went deeper into the jungle looking for gold.

During the twenty years since the beginning of the Great Experiment, it is estimated that over one million miners staked claims throughout the Amazon looking for gold. They dug holes, ripped up forest, dredged rivers and uncovered untold amounts of the yellow ore. In one year alone, they poured twelve tons of mercury into the great tributaries of the Amazon, and ten times that into the atmosphere. They built over 750 clandestine airstrips throughout the forest, and made new cities where there was once only unbroken jungle. They invaded the lands of the Yanomani, the Nambi-kwara, the Kayapo, the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau, and the Xingu, looking for gold, and they waged war on any and all who resisted them.

In time, there was talk everywhere about gold, about enormous deposits of the yellow ore found all over the jungle. The word went out all up and down the road and the gold miners came.



As of September 26, 1972:
40 million cubic Meters of earth moved.
4000 meters of wooden bridges built.
120 million square meters of deforestation.

The Transamazonic highway is one of our generation's commitment with the future. It's our contribution: a doorway to the jungle.

— Mario Andreazza, Minister of Transportation, at the inauguration of the first completed stretch of road between Altamira - Itaituba, Km 1254, September 26, 1972