

Top 5 environmental sites at risk in Latin America



Part of the Belize Barrier Reef. (Source: f. ermert/flickr)

Latin America boasts some of the most stunning ecosystems in the world, but they are not immune from man-made dangers. In no particular order, here are five prominent environmental sites at risk:

Belize Barrier Reef, Belize (*overdevelopment*)

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996, the Belize Barrier Reef (BBR) is the second largest in the world, and home to astounding biodiversity. And while the annual economic contribution of reef-related tourism, fisheries, and scientific research is estimated at around 15% of Belize's GDP, the site is at risk from unsustainable development and the unintended side effects of other human activities. The BBR has been on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger since 2009, due to the sale, lease, and development of mangrove islands and the lack of a solid regulatory framework for the site's conservation. Offshore oil activity was added to the list of concerns in 2010, with the entire reef parceled out into concessions for oil exploration. Since 1998, 40% of the reef has been damaged by harmful activities, [according to the World Wildlife Federation](#) (WWF).

However, things are improving with the new government that took office late last year. In December the Cabinet [banned offshore exploration](#) in 15% of the country's marine territory, including within the 7 protected areas of the BBR and within one kilometer on either side of it. A temporary moratorium on all offshore drilling remains in place, and in February the government adopted a first-ever [Integrated Coastal Zone management plan](#) which aims to preserve the reef in an economically sustainable way and get it removed from the danger list next year.

Gran Chaco, Paraguay (*deforestation*)

Stretched across Paraguay and into neighboring Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil, the Chaco region is South

America's second largest forest, with unique biodiversity. But it suffers the highest rate of deforestation in the world, with more than 14 million trees being cut down every month, [according to advocacy group Survival International](#).

[According to satellite imagery from environmental NGO Guyra Paraguay](#), around 25 million trees (or some 50,574 hectares of land) were cut down in the Gran Chaco during last October alone, with the majority — 55% — in Paraguayan territory. This poses a mortal danger to wildlife, releases huge GHG emissions, and threatens indigenous tribes living in the forest. Lacking formal titles to their land, they are largely powerless to protect their rights. As a result, many of the Ayoreo people have been forced out of their ancestral forest by ranching firms who have been granted licenses by the government — or by criminals (including some firms) illegally cutting down trees. Almost all of the Ayoreo's forest is now owned by private landowners, who clear the forest of valuable timber and then begin cattle ranching.

[Blouin News previously reported](#) that Paraguay's planned expansion of its beef industry from the current 12-14 million head of cattle to 20 million by 2020 may bring economic prosperity, but it will mean more deforestation. And even though the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ordered Paraguay in February to stop illegal deforestation in the Ayoreo forest, last month [Survival International wrote](#) that the government's response has been "totally inadequate," focusing on development projects while failing to give land rights to the Ayoreo.

Lake Poopó, Bolivia (*climate change*)

Lake Poopó, what used to be Bolivia's second largest lake, has dried up completely — causing a catastrophe for wildlife and all surrounding communities. (Check out [Blouin News' previous coverage here](#).) An increase in average temperature from 42.8°F to 48.2°F increased evaporation in the sunny region, and the el Niño-caused drought exacerbated matters.

But those weren't the only causes. Agricultural enterprises dumped tons of sediment into the lake, gradually transforming it from a depression to a shallow almost-flat plain. And the mining industry is also [to blame](#), both by taking water from Lake Desaguadero (which supplied Poopó) and by allowing contaminated runoff from mining activities to seep into the lake. Nevertheless, there won't be any halt to mining. In fact, in December President Evo Morales [announced](#) that Bolivia plans to invest \$1.97 billion in its metallurgical and mining industries by 2020.

In a Univision [special](#) published in March on the lake's disappearance, an expert agronomist from the Universidad Técnica de Oruro said that Lake Poopó could regenerate itself completely over 20 years, but only if all of those factors that contributed to its drying-up are minimized. But even if — and this is a big if — waters return, restoring the previous intricate ecosystem of plants and animals will be harder to achieve without an existing base to expand upon.

Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina (*dams*)

One of the more controversial legacies of former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was the \$5.7 billion agreement with China to build two massive dams on the Santa Cruz river in Patagonia. As [Blouin News reported earlier](#), they would supposedly bring jobs and reliable electricity to the province of Santa Cruz, but the deal drew immediate fire for its opaque nature and its lack of a proper environmental impact before preliminary work began.

When the new administration of Mauricio Macri took office in December, the entire project was reviewed. By damming the river and creating artificial reservoirs, Lake Argentino upstream would be affected, as would Los Glaciares National Park, in the western portion of the lake (where three huge glaciers from the Southern Ice Field calve into the water). Yet on Thursday Argentina's Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra announced (alongside her Chinese counterpart in Beijing) that the two dams would go ahead, albeit with modifications, notably a reduction in electricity-generating capacity.

A group of NGOs (whose members include Emiliano Ezcurra, the current vice-president of Argentina's National Parks Administration) has since issued a [statement condemning the project](#). The notion that simply reducing the turbines from 11 to 8 would prevent the dams from impacting the environment is — at the very least — irresponsible on the part of the national government, they said.

Southern Nicaragua, Nicaragua (*inter-oceanic canal*)

Chinese mogul Wang Jing's \$50 billion planned canal across Nicaragua has been shrouded with mystery and dogged by controversy ever since President Daniel Ortega accepted it in 2012. The proposed route would link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by passing through Lake Nicaragua, the largest freshwater lake in Central America, and some remote jungle home to endangered species and several indigenous tribes.

The lake would be forever altered by saltwater exposure and the passage of cargo ships through it. And while the company building the canal, the Hong Kong Nicaragua Development Group (HKND), [released](#) an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment in November, it failed to include a comprehensive biodiversity study looking at threats to wildlife. (Unsurprisingly, HKND's plan to mitigate environmental harm has not been made public.) However, a [study](#) published in March by conservation groups Panthera and Global Wildlife Conservation, along with Michigan State University researchers, found that the inter-oceanic canal would be disastrous for three endangered species. An artificial lake created for the project would flood most of the habitat for jaguars, white-lipped peccaries, and Baird's tapirs, while the canal itself would create a barrier separating mammal populations in the southern part of Central America from those in the north.

That said, while some conservationists argue that wildlife studies and mitigation for the canal have been inadequate, others say that deforestation across the region has become so severe that the canal project (if done right), could actually benefit biodiversity, with its profits used to fund wildlife protection and reforestation, [wrote environmental news site Mongabay](#). Even without the canal, farmers in Nicaragua's east are already deforesting the region at a rapid pace, and biologists predict that the most important protected lands would be lost within the next several decades.

Though mitigation measures — adding security for nearby protected areas and reducing deforestation surrounding the canal — are listed in HKND's plans, the company has not yet earmarked funds or released specific strategies to implement them, Mongabay added. So the firm's credibility is questionable, and the government's apparent lack of interest is not grounds for optimism either. Construction is slated to begin this Fall, but the project might collapse for reasons unrelated to Nicaragua's environment — Wang Jing's telecoms fortune was devastated in the stock market crashes last year.