

Planned Brazil-Peru Highway Threatens One Of Earth's Most Biodiverse Places

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- *Serra do Divisor National Park on Brazil's border with Peru is home to numerous endemic animals and more than a thousand plant species, but faces a double threat from a planned highway and a bid to downgrade its protected status.*
- *The downgrade from national park to “environmental protection area” would paradoxically open up this Andean-Amazon transition region to deforestation, cattle ranching, and mining — activities that are currently prohibited in the park.*
- *The highway project, meant to give Acre another land route to the Pacific via Peru, has been embraced by the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, which has already taken the first steps toward its construction.*
- *Indigenous and river community leaders say they have not been consulted about the highway, as required by law, and have not been told about the proposed downgrade of the park, both of which they warn will have negative socioenvironmental impacts.*

Mongabay Latam and Folha, through the Stories Without Borders project, document what is happening on the border between Peru and Brazil.

MÂNCIO LIMA, Acre — The Acre antshrike is known from only one place on Earth: in the highlands of Serra do Divisor National Park in Brazil's Acre state. The habitat of this surly-looking, dark-plumaged bird, known locally as *choca-do-acre* and scientifically as *Thamnophilus divisorius*, is limited to shrubby woodlands, one of the 10 types of forests in this protected area on Brazil's border with Peru.

The park is home to numerous endemic animals and at least 1,163 plant species, making it one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. It's also the only comprehensive Brazilian protected area located within the transition zone between the Andes and the Amazon.

Despite this, two projects have been proposed that would both build a highway to Peru bisecting the park, and allow for the privatization of the park's territory, thereby opening the way for deforestation, cattle ranching, and mining.

The proposals have been promoted by two politicians from Acre who are allies of President Jair Bolsonaro. The Bolsonaro administration has already embraced the highway plan, taking the first steps toward the construction of the Brazilian portion of the road. But it has not yet made public its position on a bill pending in Congress that would put an end to Serra do Divisor National Park.

The existing BR-364 highway starts in the city of Limeira in São Paulo state, and runs more than 4,300 kilometers (nearly 2,700 miles) northwest to the town of Mâncio Lima in Acre. Successive Brazilian governments have weighed plans since the 1970s to extend it into Peru, giving Brazil a land route to the Pacific; the extension was even referred to in the decree establishing Serra do Divisor National Park in 1989, under the presidency of José Sarney. But when officials finally did inaugurate the Interoceanic Highway, in 2010, the link into Peru ran from Rio Branco, the Acre state capital, 670 km (415 mi) back down the BR-364 from Mâncio Lima.



Houseboats on the Juruá River in the city of Cruzeiro do Sul, Acre state. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

When Bolsonaro took office in January 2019, the idea of running the extension from Mâncio Lima was revived once again. In 2020, three of his ministers visited Acre to discuss the issue. In June, Ricardo Salles, the environment minister, visited the area where the construction would begin. ([Salles was ousted](#) a year later after being named in two probes into alleged illegal exports of Amazon timber.) In September 2020, Ernesto Araújo, the foreign minister, and Rogério Marinho, the minister of regional development, visited Cruzeiro do Sul, the largest city in the Juruá Valley region, where the road would cross, and a 40-minute drive from Mâncio Lima. They met with local and Peruvian officials.

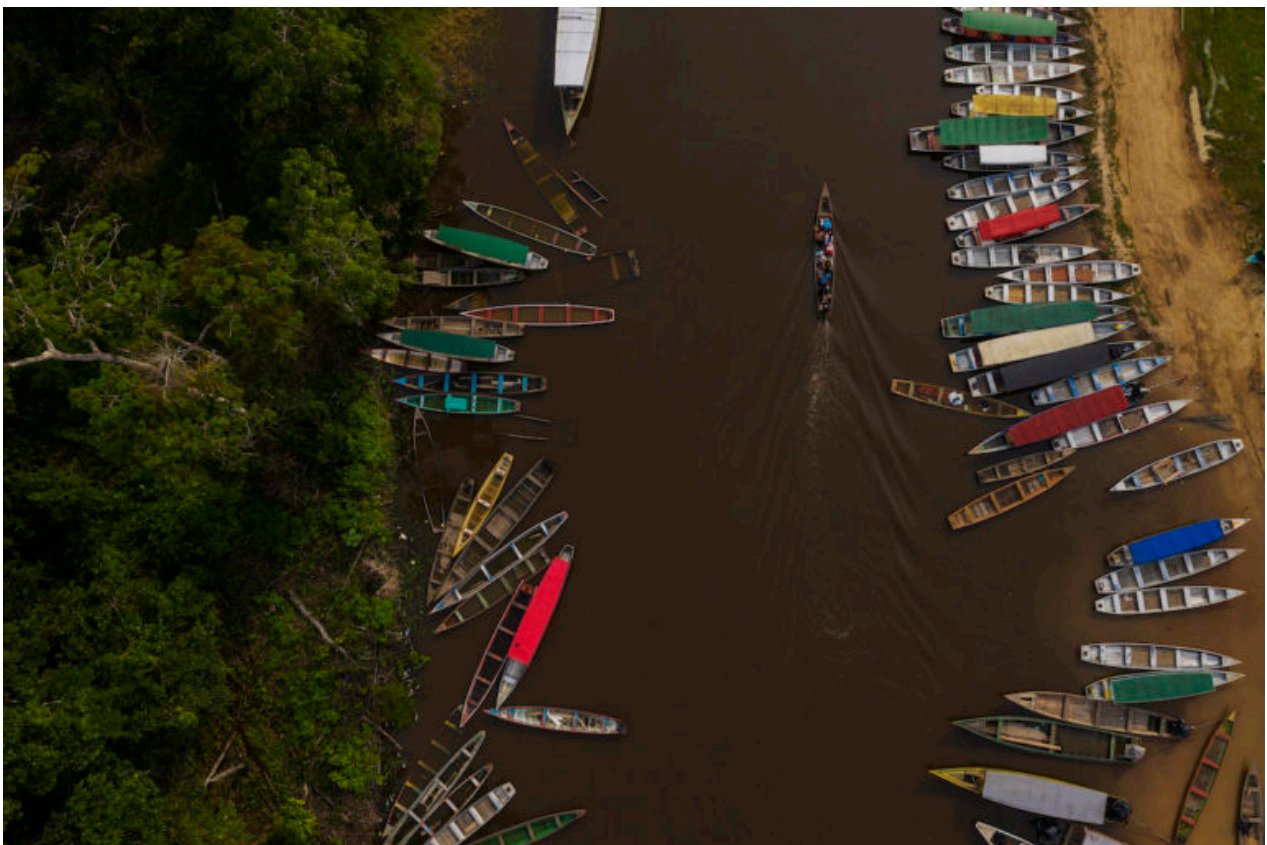
Also in September, Bolsonaro touted the project in a Facebook live address, confirming he planned to open a new route from Brazil to the Pacific, echoing the speech of former president Lula da Silva in the 2000s, who oversaw the completion of the first Interoceanic Highway with his then counterpart from Peru, Alejandro Toledo. Toledo is now a fugitive from justice for alleged corruption in the awarding of public works contracts, including for the Peruvian section of the highway.

Brazil's National Transport Infrastructure Department (DNIT) published this May the call for bids on the project, budgeted at about 500 million reais (\$95 million), according to official estimates. The department began analyzing the bids in June. It says there is still no detailed mapping of the federal highway, but that the Brazilian section will run about 120 km (75 mi), of which 21 km (13 mi), or 17%, will cut through Serra do Divisor National Park.

Divided opinions

Indigenous and riverine community leaders say they have not been consulted about the highway project, as required by law, and have expressed concerns about negative socioenvironmental impacts. "As of today, you were the first person to ask me about the highway," Indigenous chief Joel Puyanawa told Folha in a conversation at his village's cultural center.

The Poyanawa Indigenous Territory lies 10 km (6 mi) up a dirt road from the urban center of Mâncio Lima. It's home to some 680 inhabitants, and lies in the area of direct influence of the highway. Salles was there on June 27, 2020, but Joel Puyanawa did not meet with him. The environment minister defended the road project when he met with Indigenous leaders, telling them that "it is time for integration."



Boats on the banks of the Japiim River in Mâncio Lima, Acre state, near Serra do Divisor National Park.

Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

“The entire surroundings of our land are already compromised,” said Joel Puyanawa, who was elected in 2020 to the Mâncio Lima City Council. “We already know the damage caused by the invasions. The white [people] live by hunting on our land and the environmental institutions have no policy to prevent it. Imagine a highway. How many millions of people are going to travel along it? Will agribusiness increase? Yes, but our survival is not in agribusiness.”

He said he also fears the road will pass over a sacred zone, located outside the demarcated Indigenous land. It was in this region, around 1910, where the Puyanawa people were captured as slaves by the military colonel and rubber baron Mâncio Lima to work on his plantation. Despite this, Lima is today portrayed as a hero in Brazil’s official history, even having a city named after him.

“This road threatens 100% of our land, it destroys our sacred site,” Joel Puyanawa said. “The damage done by the colonel was enough. If the road is built, it exterminates the history of our people.”

Yet local officials and businesspeople are betting on the highway to put an end to the geographic isolation of this westernmost region of the country. The reelected mayor of Mâncio Lima, Isaac Lima (not related to the colonel), is a staunch supporter of the planned highway extension, to the point that he even cleared some 40 km (25 mi) of path along the likely route.

Lima is also a cattle rancher, and he says the connection with the Peruvian city of Pucallpa, 740 km (460 mi) from Mâncio Lima, would bring benefits to this town of 19,000 inhabitants, who live mainly from cattle ranching and farming. “The highway would connect the whole world and bring to our region, surely, development, growth, and Mâncio Lima would be the gateway,” Mayor Lima said.

On May 6, the Bolsonaro government renewed its promise to build and take BR-364 to the Peruvian border. That was the day Bolsonaro, with his minister of infrastructure, Tarcísio de Freitas, and a few thousand supporters, inaugurated a bridge over the Madeira River. The bridge lies on the highway, near the border between Acre and Rondônia states, 931 km (578 miles) from Cruzeiro do Sul. In his speech at the inauguration, de Freitas cited the expansion of the road to Pucallpa as one of the government’s road projects.

The person most responsible for reviving the highway extension plan is Márcio Bittar, a federal senator representing Acre and self-declared staunch ally of Bolsonaro. He holds a strategic position as rapporteur of the 2021 national budget, which gives him the power to direct funds for the highway, among other functions.

But the money for the project isn’t there just yet. Bittar included in this year’s budget an addendum of 40 million reais (\$7.6 million) for “studies and projects” to expand the highway, but Bolsonaro vetoed this expense as part of wider cuts to balance the federal budget amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



A boat transporting cattle on the Moa River, inside Serra do Divisor National Park in Acre state. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

When questioned by Folha on the cut during his inauguration, Bittar said there will be “the necessary money” of 18.5 billion reais (\$3.5 billion) to build the road, without providing further details.

Another federal lawmaker, Mara Rocha of the lower house of congress, or Chamber of Deputies, sponsored a bill in November 2019 that would transform Serra do Divisor National Park into a so-called environmental protection area (APA). Paradoxically, such a change would strip the area of its existing protections, opening the way for land privatization, deforestation, logging, cattle ranching, mining, and shale gas extraction.

However, the governor of Acre, Gladson Cameli, said he’s against downgrading the national park to an APA, and has not appeared keen on the highway project either. He was not present at any of the ministerial visits to discuss the road. In a phone interview, he said the project is “medium to long term” and that the state has other priorities, such as increasing trade traffic through the existing Interoceanic Highway.

Cameli said his main concern about the highway is the possible increase in Peruvian cocaine smuggling in Cruzeiro do Sul, the largest municipality neighboring Mâncio Lima and the main entry route into Acre. “[The gangs] are dominating. Borders need a greater presence of the rule of law,” he said.

In light of how the highway project is being planned by the federal government and lawmakers, the Federal Public Ministry has initiated an investigation into irregularities in the project administration.

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The Acre state prosecutor general, Lucas Costa Almeida Dias, said the objective is to ensure that “Indigenous communities are consulted in a free, prior and informed manner,” in accordance with Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, to which Brazil is a signatory.

Dias said the route of the highway should consider the possible presence of isolated Indigenous communities and that the licensing should be done by the federal environmental regulator, IBAMA, with the participation of Brazil’s Indigenous affairs agency, Funai, and not by the state environmental agency, which is more susceptible to political pressures.

Opposing the end of the park

Folha visited the northern region of Serra do Divisor National Park in late October and early November 2020, taking a nine-hour boat trip on the Moa River from Mâncio Lima to the Pé da Serra community, the westernmost town in Brazil.

With three inns maintained by local residents, Pé da Serra is a base for tourists in search of waterfalls, panoramic views and jungle trails. One of the most beautiful and impressive sites is the Moa River canyon. It’s a 40-minute boat ride amid green mountains, a scenery more often associated with the Peruvian Amazon yet within sight of the Andes.



A canoe navigates the waters of the Moa River in Serra do Divisor National Park, Acre state, one of the most biodiverse areas of the Amazon. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

Pé da Serra sits inside Serra do Divisor National Park, and is one of several settlements within the park that are home to a total of about 350 families. Legally they shouldn’t be living here, but most had already settled in the area when the park was created. More than three decades on, the federal government has still not concluded their resettlement. In Pé da Serra, they live off tourism, non-mechanized agriculture, hunting and fishing.

Their electricity comes from diesel-powered generators and solar panels. The houses distributed along the banks of the river are close to the first mountain range, which at dawn is shrouded in mist. They get around in canoes with small motors, piloted by adults and children alike. With no internet connection, a single public telephone is all their communication with the outside world.

Born and raised on the banks of the Moa River, 41-year-old peasant Eva Maria Lima da Silva said she opposes both the downgrading of the national park and the construction of the highway extension. Also a cook at the pioneering Pousada do Miro restaurant, she said the existence of the park is what prevented the expansion of cattle ranching here, and that tourism is still the best economic alternative.



Eva Maria Lima, a resident of the Pé da Serra community inside Serra do Divisor National Park, washes pots in the Moa River. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

“If the highway is built, our park will be affected. It would be good because of the speed, but, traveling along the river, our road, how many beauties do I not see? How many jungles are preserved?” she said.

Another long-time resident, 51-year-old farmer and artisan João Silva, said the road would be beneficial in reducing the community’s isolation: “Suddenly, if we need to go to the street, we would take the road, it’s faster.”

But he disagreed with the proposal to downgrade the park — a project that residents were unaware of until we raised it with them. “In a sense, I thought it was good, because people could find a job. But leaving it untapped would be better. We stay quiet, no one is going to bother us. If these people come in, they’re going to take a lot of people out of here. Farmers are going to come in, buy [land], and a lot of [residents] are going to have to leave,” Silva said.



Riverside resident João Silva dos Santos at the window of his house in the Pé da Serra community in Serra do Divisor National Park.

Neighbors of the park and historical inhabitants of the Moa River and Serra do Divisor, the Indigenous Nukini reject both the highway and park downgrade plans, according to chieftain Paulo Nukini, 39. He said he was not consulted about the project, and his people have demanded that part of the park be annexed to the Indigenous territory, which was demarcated in 1991.

“We are against it because we know it is going to cause a strong impact, a lot of deforestation. It can increase access to contraband [cocaine trafficking]. And it will leave our sierra with a high risk of contamination. For us, Nukinis, the sierra is a sacred place,” Paulo Nukini said in front of his village on the riverbank. “Brazil has lived until today without needing that passage there.”

Researcher’s paradise

The rich biodiversity and large number of endemic species in Serra do Divisor is due mainly to the varied altitude, ranging from 200-640 meters (650-2,100 feet). It’s also home to three types of rivers that exist in the Amazon: white water (muddy), black water, and clear water (transparent). And it’s the only integral protected zone in Brazil that contains a branch of the Andes, including native flora and fauna.

“Since 1901, about 3,500 botanical collections have been made in the Serra do Divisor, with 1,163 species recorded,” says Federal University of Acre (Ufac) biologist Marcos Silveira, who has been studying the area for 24 years. “The number of vascular plant species [with sap-conducting vessels] represents 8.3% of the known diversity in the Amazon.”



Aerial view of the forest in Serra do Divisor National Park, Acre state. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

This catalog of life continues to grow. Silveira is working with other researchers on a new paper that will show that the list of plant species recorded in the park has increased by 63% since 1997, when 720 of them were identified. On average, three species are found in Serra do Divisor every two months: species that are either new to the park, new to Acre, or even new to science.

It's a similar story of the park's fauna. "When we do inventories, we always have a great opportunity to collect new species. It's impressive," said Elder Morato, another Ufac biologist.

Two species of bees discovered in Serra do Divisor were named in his honor: *Euglossa moratoi*, one of about 30 species of orchid bees found in the park, and *Dolichotrigona moratoi*, one of about 60 native stingless honey bees.

Another stingless bee discovered in the park is *Celetrigona euclydiana*, named in tribute to Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, was in Acre to help establish Brazil's border with Peru.

"For us biologists, the Serra do Divisor is emblematic. It is no exaggeration to say that everyone dreams of visiting it someday," researchers Leandro Moraes (University of São Paulo), Tomaz Melo (Federal University of Amazonas) and Raíssa Rainha wrote in a commentary. All three are affiliated with the National Institute of Amazon Research, based in Manaus, in Amazonas state.



Butterflies on the banks of the Moa River in Serra do Divisor National Park. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

In November 2019, the three biologists participated in a research expedition for a vertebrate census to commemorate the park's 30th anniversary. They found nearly 80 species of amphibians and 40 species of lizards and snakes.

In addition, they identified 326 bird species, of which at least five were new records for the park, which now has more than 500 cataloged bird species. One of them has become the mascot for the region: the choca-do-acre, found nowhere else on Earth.

"This wide-ranging diversity is only documented in other regions of the Amazon after decades of studies in the same place. In Serra do Divisor, we recorded it in less than 15 days of sampling. Many of these species are quite restricted to this region and are no longer found in the eastern direction of Acre," the researchers wrote.

Such diversity prompted the Ministry of Environment to apply to UNESCO in 2017 to recognize Serra do Divisor National Park as a Natural World Heritage Site. This distinction has only been granted to two other Amazonian regions: Manú National Park in Peru, and the Central Amazon, a set of four conservation units in the state of Amazonas: Jaú, Anavilhanas, Mamirauá and Amanã.



Sign indicating the limits of Serra do Divisor National Park in Acre state. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

The proposal, however, ended up being withdrawn days later due to pressure from Brazil's National Defense Council, a military-led body, on the grounds that such a recognition posed a threat to national security.

Quarry in the park

In her bill seeking to downgrade Serra do Divisor into an APA, Federal Deputy Mara Rocha used just 213 words to justify the end of the national park. She didn't cite any environmental or economic studies making the case for the downgrade.

Instead, she said the 846,300-hectare (2.1-million-acre) park, the ninth largest in Brazil, "meets the interests and needs of the people of Acre" because it is the "only region in the state that has rocks that can be extracted and used in construction to promote the economic development of the state."

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In a video released in January 2020, she said the goal is to allow human habitation inside the park, and that the "project is authored by Senator Márcio Bittar."

In a phone interview, however, Bittar distanced himself from his ally's initiative. He said he is not such an "idiot" that he would present legislation to get rid of the park, but still defended the bill's content. "Germany, which finances NGOs linked to the national media, made an Itaipu and a half" — a reference to Brazil's biggest hydropower plant — "in thermoelectric, digging hole in the ground for coal. Now, we, in poor Acre, miserable, in the miserable Amazon, have no stone," he said.

“If inside the reserve there is a stone deposit of less than a square kilometer, you can’t take it out, because the law says you can’t take it out. If there is oil there, can you take it out? You can’t. And it will continue like that, because I am not an idiot and I know that if I present such a bill, it will not be approved,” he added.

Folha reached out to Rocha for comment, but she did not respond to the request for an interview.



Old boiler used in a borehole by Brazilian oil and gas company Petrobras on the banks of the Moa River inside Serra do Divisor National Park, Acre state. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

First binational highway

Acre has had a road link to the Pacific via Peru since 2010. In Rio Branco, the BR-364 highway meets the smaller BR-317, which runs 340 km (210 mi) to the town of Assis Brazil. Here, at the point where the Brazilian, Peruvian and Bolivian borders meet, it meets the Peruvian stretch of the Interoceanic Highway, which later branches out, providing access to three Pacific seaports. But this link has failed to fulfill the promise of transforming Acre into an export hub or a corridor to Asia. In Peru, the highway caused an explosion of deforestation and illegal logging, and is at the center of a corruption scandal that has rocked the country’s politics.

The year the highway was inaugurated, exports accounted for 0.4% of Acre’s GDP, according to data from the Ministry of Economy and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. In 2018, the latest year for which data are available, they made up just 0.7%.

The other states that make up the northern region of Brazil saw their own exports grow much faster over the same period. Exports from the seven-state bloc in 2010, including Acre, made up 14% of GDP; in 2018, it was 17.4%.

“The highway has not changed Acre’s economic reality, except for driving to Lima, Cuzco,”

said George Pinheiro, an Acre businessman who heads the Confederation of Commercial and Business Associations of Brazil.

“The expectation was that most of the transportation companies would make a cheaper route and go to China, to Japan. None of this happened,” he added.

Asked about the low economic impact of the highway a decade after it opened, Senator Bittar said the road is “not viable” because of its many turns and its high altitude through the Andes.

“The highway that goes through Assis Brasil has a serious problem. It exits in the high cordillera and is more than 16,000 feet [4,900 m] high. There is no truck that passes there, it has so many curves that it is not viable,” he said. “The most important exit is through [the] Juruá [River], because the cordillera has an altitude of 6,500 feet [2,000 m].”



Houseboats on the Juruá River in the city of Cruzeiro do Sul, Acre state. Image by Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

Bolsonaro made the same point in September, but it omits the fact that the Peruvian section also has high-altitude sections: on the route from the border town of Pucallpa to the port of Callao in Lima, the road passes through Cerro de Pasco, one of the highest cities in the world, at an elevation of more than 4,300 m (14,200 ft).

Bittar said no official study has been completed on the economic impact of the highway, but proposed the creation of a binational committee to “gather all the documentation from both sides: what they have that interests us and what we have that interests them.”

Pinheiro, the businessman, said the new highway connecting between Cruzeiro do Sul to Pucallpa, a city of about 380,000 inhabitants, is a particularly local need. “In terms of Amazonian distances, it is very small [210 km, or 130 mi]. And it would be a connection to a

Peruvian city with a large commercial and industrial movement," he said.

He added there was political prestige attached to resuming the project. "There are new actors who want to build the highway," Pinheiro said. "Everyone wants to have the stamp: 'It was me who built the road.'"

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