



Smoke rises from forest fires in Otuquis National Park

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#SOSBOLIVIA: TIME TO PUT OUT THE FIRES

The Amazon represents over half of the planet's remaining rainforests. It is the largest and most biodiverse rainforest in the world, providing up to 20% of the world's entire oxygen supply ¹. Those lungs are choking, as thousands of fires rage all across the South American continent. International news has largely placed the focus on Brazil and the policies of President Bolsonaro, but the Amazon Basin spreads over 9 countries in South America, including the Southern Hemisphere's largest landlocked country; Bolivia. Action For Bolivia's Sam Twyman reports on a nationwide environmental disaster and the political conditions that have led to it.

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'Action For Bolivia' is an independent, civil movement.

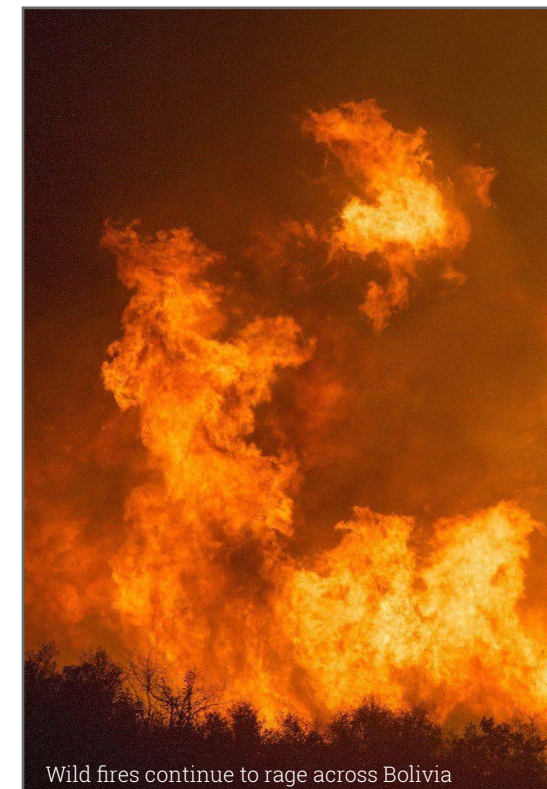
Bolivia has been caught between two conflicting objectives, providing sustainable economic growth (Bolivia is classed as a developing country) and providing adequate protection for the natural world. This dissonance has been reflected in president Evo Morales's contradictory policies. Voted in on a campaign proudly showcasing his indigenous heritage (the UN's General Assembly declared him a "World Hero of Mother Earth" ²), his government recently introduced legislation that encouraged aggressive burning of forest areas. Farmers are now authorised to burn 20 hectares instead of the previous amount of five hectares ³ and the fines for illegal destruction are only \$6.60 per acre ⁴. With various deregulations of rainforest protection and burgeoning international trade markets, farmers were given every incentive to light the torch. Huge numbers of small farmers travelled from the north of Bolivia to create new farming territories to satisfy the country's thirst for international trade. In 2019 Bolivia established an agreement to supply beef to China, the world's largest market with 1.4 billion people. The IBCE (Bolivian Foreign Trade Institute) aimed to satisfy the international demand by an aggressive expansion of the industry. In January 2019, President Evo Morales presented the 'Livestock Development Plan 2020 - 2030' to livestock farmers and cattle ranchers which included guidelines for increasing land use for livestock from 13 million to 20 million hectares. The IBCE aims to sell \$150 million of beef by 2020. "This means exporting in almost half a year what has been done in 10 years," Gary Rodríguez, president of the IBCE ⁵.

With a race to claim new agriculture territories, traditional precautionary methods for safe clearing have been ignored and indiscriminate slashing and burning has led to wildfires spreading all across the forest areas. According to the INPE (Brazil's National Institute for Space Research) Bolivia saw 13,396 fires in August, a 422% increase on the previous month. ⁶ In the last four weeks, over 4.2 million acres (1.7 million hectares) of land has been destroyed ⁷, from the Amazon rainforest to the dry forest of Chiquitano to the East, a unique ecosystem that has borne the brunt of the blaze, with huge areas completely decimated ⁸. It's a tragedy of epic proportions, the largest ecological disaster in the entire history of Bolivia. Firefighters desperately try to claim ground from the fire, but it is an impossible battle, especially as Morales has rejected much foreign support. The situation is so dangerous that firefighters have been killed in their attempts to manage the disaster ⁹.

The firefighters and ground volunteers share tragic stories of animals they have encountered in the disaster. Armadillos burnt to death, charred Sloths holding their arms out for desperate help, wild jaguars running in sheer terror or pacas incapacitated in abject pain. The charred remains of the forests are filled with the stench of burnt flesh. "It's nesting season and when the trees caught light the parrots died in their nests. My companions and I would cry, we felt so powerless. It's the worst tragedy we've ever seen here." (Manacá's fire chief, Luis Andrés Roca ¹⁰). Over 17,000 square kilometres of the world's most bountiful biodiverse paradises have been completely destroyed and the fires still rage. Environmental experts say the fires are threatening about 500 types of animals, including jaguars, tapirs, and 35 endangered species, some of which are found nowhere else ¹¹.

Protest groups are mobilising nationally and internationally, putting pressure on President Evo Morales to declare the fires a national disaster. Many have pointed to the President's almost complete lack of immediacy or political will to deal with the emergency responsibly. The President previously refused international aid telling local radio stations that Bolivia did not need "to extend its arms and beg" ¹². After mounting pressure and the impending elections for a 4th term, Morales is slowly shape shifting in response to the public and has publicly welcomed international aid ¹³. However, that aid and support is still struggling to make its way through the borders and customs. The incentives for slash and burn still remain and the amount of action by the government is grossly disproportionate to the scale of the disaster. The real problem is political will. Bolivia is a country at odds with itself, determined to be a sanctuary for life (Evo Morales passed the Law of Rights for Mother Earth in 2010 ¹⁴) and yet also a main player on the international agriculture trade market in competition with Brazil and Argentina. As large international corporations are more than happy to buy beef and other agro-products at rock bottom prices from developing countries, what can the natural world do in defense? The real defense must come from the ground up, with mobilised political pressure nationally and internationally from those who value nature above profit. Marches and demonstrations across Bolivia are adding pressure to the government to act accordingly to meet the ecological disaster. A disaster created by greed, ambition and the international demand for beef.

www.actionforbolivia.org



Wild fires continue to rage across Bolivia

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