



AURA Newsletter

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An outburst on the recent Amazonian environmental crisis: the perspective of three South American rock art researchers

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It has been quite some time now since international news started the coverage of terrifying and outrageous massive anthropogenic hazards mainly focused in Brazilian Amazonia that reached an unprecedented level by the end of last August and beginning of September. We witnessed the alarming dispersal of fires encompassing Brazilian, Bolivian and Peruvian Amazon biomes, where we work as rock art researchers with many Indigenous friends and research partners.

Amazonia, along with its known and huge unknown socio-biodiversity, is now facing the most deleterious of all consequences of the Capitalocene since the onset of the European collision, when the Spanish invaders Pizarro, Orellana and Carvajal descended the Amazonian streams in 1542. So far, the present moment seems pretty much like the darkest hour of our human biospheric journey, based on the well-established scientific understanding that what disrupts the Amazonian biome affects the climate crisis in the entire planet.

The dark afternoon sky and the rain with ashes that fell over São Paulo megalopolis in August, and the increasing levels of carbon monoxide that were coming straight from the immense fire-scorched zone in Brazilian and Bolivian Amazonia (especially the Chiquitania region), made their dramatic entrance in this South American apocalyptic theatre. It leaves no doubt that it is a scorched land state policy of generalised slash and burn for the Amazonian neotropics. Now, without even slashing anymore, only burning everything down — a *'let it burn'* policy.

At least 33% of the fires are targeting protected Indigenous territories (Web 1), such as the Araguaia Indigenous Park in Tocantins state, Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land in Mato Grosso state and Conservation Units such as the APA Triunfo do Xingu in Pará state. The southern Pará state border with northern Mato Grosso state and almost the entire Rondônia state up to the Bolivian border is a sort of Amazonian hotspot for land grabbing, coupled with deforestation. This portion of the Amazon is highly coveted by shadowy massive land 'owners', openly sponsored by political lobbies, eager for the agro-industry expansion over those stretches of the Amazonian forest. Noteworthy is the fact that 67% of the fires were ignited in 'their' lands. So, we do not doubt that the fires were not accidental nor ill-planned side-effects of local traditions of forest management; arsonist land grabbers criminally and strategically planned them, militia-like organised and inflated by a governmental policy of scorched earth for Amazonia. Echoing a commonsensical understanding among those massive land grabbers and arsonists in southwestern Amazonian frontiers of Brazil: 'the owner is the one who deforests' (Torres et al. 2017).

No, there is no doubt that we have crossed the Rubicon, and we all fear and resist the idea of reaching that irreversibility point in the socio-environmental history of capitalism. However, it is not an exaggeration considering that it might have already come, that it has already settled down. Something that turns self-evident, for example, when these massive fires become the current idiom for militia-like socio-



Figure 1. *Amazonian pictograms affected by an anthropogenic fire set to deforest a stretch of jungle for cattle raising. Though not directly related to the recent fire episodes, this image illustrates what happens in an Amazonian rock art site during deforestation fire exposures. Alenquer, Pará state, Brazilian Amazonia. Photograph February 2019 by RV.*

environmental terrorism sanctioned by this Brazilian government as a public policy to promote a spooky notion of Amazonian development.

In 2015, we conjoined in an international effort, supported by IFRAO, aiming to call international awareness to a sensitive conjuncture in many South American countries regarding the deficiencies in setting effective public policies to promote and enhance the protection of Indigenous intangible cultural heritage materialised in rock art places and in sacred geofactual landscapes, when confronted by clearly inadequate and harmful massive developmental infrastructural projects. A comparison was set towards the archaeologist's attitudes and beliefs when considering worthy of protection any archaeological

site, fighting for it on legal and political grounds, whenever necessary as part of professional ethics. Suffice to say; things were not so clear when it comes to Indigenous rights over the archaeological record in South America, which consists of a disputed bogged zone within ethical and de-colonial terms.

Has this scenario changed in any possible way four years after the *Cochabamba Manifest* release (Cochabamba Manifest 2016)? Yes, and in some parts, especially in Brazil, it has worsened in horrifying aspects. Besides all political references, the rights of the land, native peoples, archaeological sites and sacred places have huge unknowns in the light of international laws and conventions; as a factual law proposes to destroy everything (biodiversity and culture) to favour particular interests.

It is unnecessary to state the dramatically adverse consequences to Indigenous people, environment and rock art/archaeological heritage in Amazonia. By now, the more pragmatic readers of this text might be questioning: 'what can we do?', to which we cannot give a clear answer right now. The actual loss of humanity's patrimony is too overwhelming to plan a straight reaction, at least in an immediate scale of time. We can suggest to pay attention and spread nonconformity and discontentment. Condemn what is being done in Brazilian, Bolivian or Peruvian Amazonia, support other reactions against it. We need a global reaction because we are about to lose more than a huge untold rock art heritage: something that affects human life as a global issue. If something goes wrong there, be sure, we will all suffer the climatic consequences right there in our backyards, sooner or later. If not, our children will, considering that it is the last nail in the global warming coffin.

Finally, we wish to stress that we are speaking beyond the realm of any rock art organisation; nor are we speaking on behalf of any Indigenous people; they, in particular, were the first to take stands of their own, *auto-demarcating* (Web 3) their opposition to all this. We are just speaking on behalf of our consciousness as human beings and rock art researchers in Brazilian, Bolivian and Peruvian Amazonia. Some of us have Indigenous traditions, and we all have been working with Indigenous people for decades, seeing first-hand what is gleaned from the news, running a real risk of what political change means in our countries. We fear for the future, for our ancestors, our parents, brothers and sisters, and our

children; we fear for Indigenous peoples, we fear for the Amazonian biome, we fear for rock art's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It does not matter why rock art researchers and other scientists, along with the majority of the local population, remain relatively silent to all of this; we need to wake up and make a stand, now, for the future.

Post Scriptum:

Sadly and revoltingly, before we finished writing this document, the most recent episode of anthropogenic fire on a Conservation Unit found its devastating way into the Monte Alegre State Park. It comprises the largest concentration of rock paintings known in Brazilian Amazonia, some of them tentatively dated at 11000 years BP. So there is no doubt that rock art sites are being systematically destroyed by fire in Peruvian, Bolivian and Brazilian Amazonia. We have to conclude that these are intentionally planned, aiming to devastate entire ecosystems and socio-environmental arrangements of traditional and Indigenous populations. Not only are rock art sites destroyed by the fires, but this arson wave is directly ravaging Indigenous historical and cultural heritage inside and outside Indigenous lands. All South American and global scientific communities that work with and promote the protection of Indigenous history, culture and human, non-human and environmental rights must take action.

Written between August and October of 2019
Santarém (Brazil), Cusco (Peru) and Cochabamba (Bolivia)

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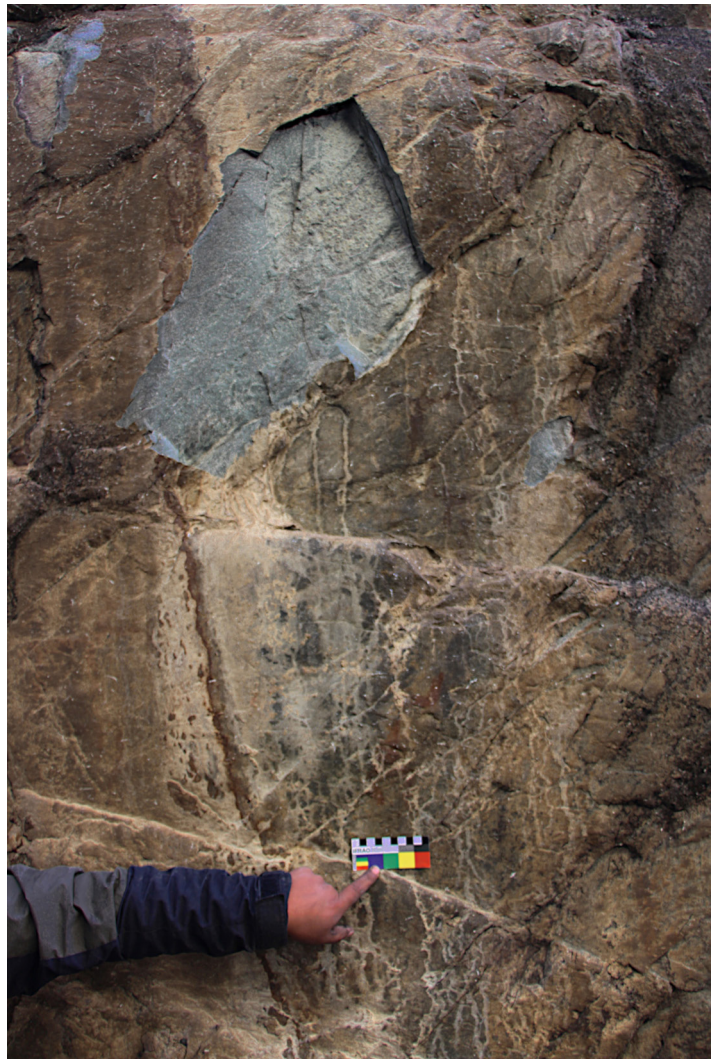


Figure 2. Amazonian-Andean pictograms affected by an anthropogenic fire set to deforest a stretch of land for cultivation. Similar to the previous picture, this image illustrates what happens to rock art sites during deforestation fire exposures. Ollantaytambo Cusco, Perú. Image from El Comercio, Lima, 9/9/2019 (Web 2).

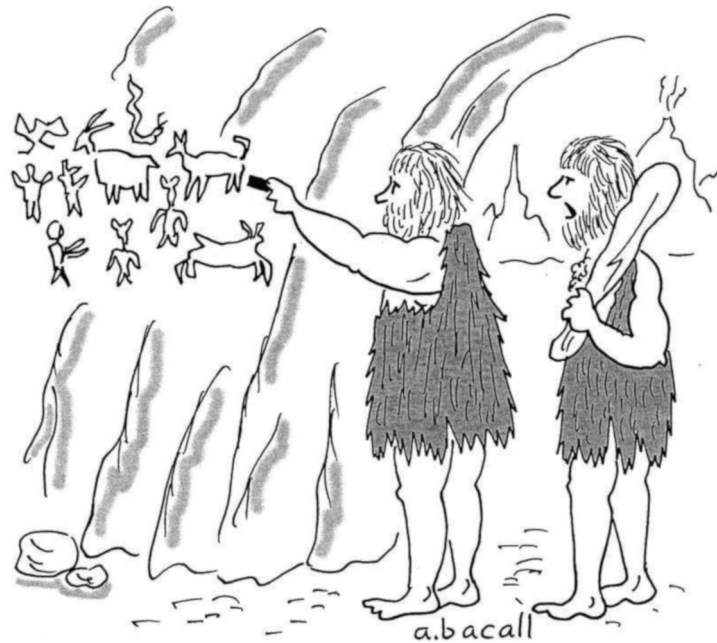
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Web 3. <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2014/1105-defying-brazilian-government-indigenous-group-proceeds-with-demarcation-of-amazonian-territory>



"In the future, that should produce thousands of PhD theses."

AURA Treasurer's financial statement 2017/2018

ROBERT G. BEDNARIK

Balance in hand on 30 June 2017: \$8682.77

INCOME:	\$	EXPENDITURES:	\$
Sales of books	881.00	Postage	207.60
Bank interest	122.10	Business Affairs Registration	56.90
		Telephone and faxes	58.25
		Website costs	205.12
		Bank and merchant account fees	29.00
TOTAL	1003.10	TOTAL	556.87

Balance in hand on 30 June 2018: \$9129.00

AURA Newsletter

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