

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Mennonites and deforestation

ON OCT. 18, the Amazon Conservation Association, a highly regarded group devoted to the preservation of the Amazon rainforest, published a report titled “Mennonite Colonies: New Deforestation Driver in the Amazon.” The report included time-lapse satellite photographs from 2017-2019 that revealed with graphic clarity the steady encroachment on the western Amazon rainforest by three Old Order Mennonite colonies in Peru and Bolivia. According to the analysis, two relatively new colonies in Peru—Tierra Blanca and Masisea—were responsible for the deforestation of 6,200 acres since 2017. An older colony—Río Negro—in the department of Beni, Bolivia, has clearcut 12,350 acres since 2017.

To be sure, these three colonies represent a small fraction of a much larger problem. In 2018, an estimated 300,000 acres were deforested, with most of the problem focused on illegal gold mining or logging operations. But the rapid expansion of Old Order Mennonite colonies in Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru is having an environmental impact.

Over the past several years, thanks in part to my work with Mennonite World Conference, I have received nearly a dozen emails from people who have become aware of Mennonite complicity in environmental degradation in Central and South America. For more than a decade, for example, Mennonite settlements in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, have faced public criticism for the rapid

decline in the water table due to their irrigation practices. The British newspaper *The Guardian* has featured several articles sharply critical of the rapid expansion of Mennonite-owned cattle ranches into the Paraguayan Chaco. In 2014, several Old Colony Mennonite leaders in Campeche, Mexico, spent time in jail for unauthorized clearing of land. And environment groups elsewhere in the Yucatan have raised additional concerns about

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Old Colony Mennonite charcoal production and use of pesticides.

Nearly always, the messages are accompanied with a sense of outrage. Someone, the argument goes, should put a stop to this.

These concerns are not misplaced, especially given our global environmental crisis. But before we speak too loudly in accusatory tones to our Mennonite cousins, we should spend a long moment in reflection and confession. After all, most of us are also living on land that at one time was “wilderness.” In our national mythology, Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox are regarded as heroes for their logging prowess. For Mennonites who trace their ancestry in North America to 18th- or 19th-century immigrants, our great-grandparents staked claims in the westward expansion.

At family reunions, we often honor their backbreaking work of removing stumps, draining swamps, plowing the prairies and converting vast acres of wilderness into land suitable for farming. Many of us are the heirs and economic beneficiaries of those practices; we simply have the good fortune of being a century removed from the circumstances of the Mennonites who are now doing the same thing in Tierra Blanca, Masisea and Río Negro.

Without a doubt, the loss of the Amazonian rainforest is a profound tragedy. But even as we speak out against further deforestation, we should do so with a certain humility. The various groups of Mennonites who have been in the news recently are not uniquely complicit in the environmental crises of our time. Like people around the world, they are trying to feed their families. In many regards, their efforts to do so by wresting resources from the natural world are no different from the Iowa farmer or the Kansas wheat producer; or, if we are honest, from the rest of us whose standard of living has a profound environmental impact, albeit one that does not show up with the same stark clarity of a satellite image.



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and secretary of MWC's Faith and Life Commission.