

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Research on rural and urban sustainability in Amazonia rewarded with the Volvo Environment Prize 2023

Press release from the Volvo Environment Prize Foundation, Oct 30, 2023

The vast Amazon region is central to the global debate on creating a stable climate and maintaining biodiversity. But we cannot deal with sustainability in Amazonia if we do not confront the rural and urban realities in the region of poverty, violence, and the need for economic development. That is the message from Eduardo Brondizio, a Brazilian-born Anthropologist Professor at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, who is the Volvo Environment Prize laureate in 2023.

For over 30 years, Eduardo Brondizio's research has documented and analyzed the development and environmental challenges of the Amazon. He has examined issues of land use, deforestation, climate change and food production — and how they impact indigenous, rural, and urban populations.

That the Amazon region mainly consists of untouched rainforests with small groups of Indigenous people is a myth. Most people know the world's largest rainforest is in Amazonia, but the cities are rarely in the global spotlight. Almost 80 percent of the thirty million inhabitants in the Brazilian Amazon basin live in cities, which are often very poor.

"Unfortunately, the problems of urban Amazonia are largely invisible, but they need to come in focus if we want to address the sustainability challenges of the region," says Eduardo Brondizio. Humans have impacted nature here for centuries, such as during the massive economic boom of rubber production in the 19th century. Essential crops in the global agricultural economy, such as cacao, cassava, and peanuts, also originate from the domestication of rainforest crops.

"Amazonia has been part of the global history of economic and resource trade for over 400 years, and that history is still there," says Eduardo Brondizio.

"When we talk about the Amazon today, we tend to think about the last few decades, when deforestation problems came to bear. But Amazonia has this deep history where the region's people have developed intensive production systems with the forest without destroying it."

One such system today is the production of Acai, a popular fruit from a palm tree, in demand not only in Brazil but exported worldwide. Acai is often locally produced in communities along the Amazon River using agroforestry, which is growing many crops on the same site.

It's not a panacea, but it offers a way forward for the Amazon, believes Eduardo Brondizio.

"Small-scale agroforestry is quite productive," he says. He is convinced that the future of Amazonia depends upon creating the sustainable use of the forest. However, the funds from cultivation need to benefit the local population more; otherwise, the problems will continue to grow.

Today, climate security and biodiversity investments are discussed at the highest levels, and the Amazon region plays a key role.

"But for it to succeed, the social conditions must improve, and we need to see how the people who live here can find the best requirements for more sustainable and inclusive development pathways," says Eduardo Brondizio.

The jury for the Volvo Environment Prize says in their motivation:

"Eduardo Brondizio is a world leader in complex systems thinking, which is embedded in an ethnographic approach. He has made extensive contributions to policy development through the engagement with the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and the Intergovernmental Science-policy platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)."

Since the first award 34 years ago, the Volvo Environment Prize has become one of the scientific world's most respected environmental prizes. The award will be celebrated on Nov 22 in Gothenburg, Sweden, with a live-streaming prize ceremony and seminar.

For more information about the 2023 laureate, the award, and how to attend the online seminar and prize ceremony, go to www.environment-prize.com

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Photo: Tore Marklund

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