

2023 – deforestation has fallen 7% compared with the same period the year before, according to Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research, which uses satellites to track tree cover. Last week, Lula was among the leaders of countries sharing the Amazon basin who gathered in Belém, Brazil, to discuss how to protect and sustainably develop the region – the first summit of its kind since 2009.

Some worry, however, that too much attention has been paid to the Amazon, to the detriment of other biomes in Brazil. Deforestation in the Cerrado, a biodiversity-rich savannah in the centre of the country, increased by 16.5% over the past year – from August 2022 to July 2023 – compared with the same period the year before. “There’s a strong stance in relation to the Amazon, but not so much for the Cerrado,” says Paulo Moutinho, an ecologist at the Amazon Institute for Environmental Research in Brasília.

The following is a breakdown of the scores bestowed by specialists, including their views on what the administration would need to do to bring its score up to 5.

LUIZ MARQUES **CLARIFY BRAZIL’S STANCE** **ON FOSSIL FUELS**

Score: 2.5

Researchers who spoke to *Nature*, including Marques, criticized the Lula administration’s lack of clarity on energy policies – particularly whether they are aligned with environmental protection. For instance, the state-owned energy firm Petrobras, based in Rio de Janeiro, has proposed drilling exploratory oil wells near the mouth of the Amazon River. This has sparked concern about a nearby reef system and caused some to wonder why Lula would entertain tapping into new fossil-fuel reserves. Marques says that the administration should instead prioritize converting Petrobras into a low-carbon energy company. “It is important to know to what extent the Lula administration will inhibit and revert onshore and offshore extraction projects already in place,” he adds.

Luiz Marques is a historian at the National Center for Research on Energy and Materials in Campinas, Brazil.

CARLOS RITTL **FIGHT INTERNAL EFFORTS** **TO DELAY ENVIRONMENTAL** **PROGRESS**

Score: 3.5

Rittl says that, for Lula to improve his score, he needs “to give a clear message to his allies in

Congress that environmental protection and Indigenous rights are not negotiable”. To Rittl, Lula must lead by example. “Only then will the world see that Brazil is back in the [environmental leadership] discussion – and will be able to put pressure on other countries to be more ambitious in their goals.”

Carlos Rittl is an environment and climate-change policy consultant based in Potsdam, Germany.

FABIANO TONI **BOLSTER PERSONNEL AT** **THE FRONT LINES OF THE** **ENVIRONMENT MINISTRY**

Score: 3.5

Toni was happy to see the Lula administration respond swiftly to a health crisis among the Yanomami people earlier this year. It declared a public-health emergency in the Yanomami territory – the largest Indigenous territory in the country – in January, after a surge in infant deaths. Illegal gold mining in the region was scaring off game, leading to malnutrition; poisoning the water with mercury; and paving the way for violence. The government led a campaign to drive thousands of the miners away from the territory.

To score a 5, Toni says, the government should hire more officers in agencies in the environment ministry, such as the Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama), which has an environmental-protection role; the National Indian

Foundation (Funai), which protects the rights of Indigenous people; and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMbio), an institution that manages protected areas. “Careers in these agencies are currently unattractive, and personnel are unprotected,” Toni says. “They need to be well paid, because roles in these agencies demand specific expertise and have strategic importance.”

Fabiano Toni is director of the Centre for Sustainable Development at the University of Brasilia.

PAULO MOUTINHO **GIVE UNTITLED LANDS** **A ‘LEGAL STATUS’**

Score: 4.0

Moutinho says that, to score a 5, the Lula administration needs to enable more effective surveillance and control of deforestation in all biomes. The government should also act quickly to give a ‘legal status’ to untitled public lands, especially in the Amazon and the Cerrado, he says. “They should be listed as protected areas, Indigenous property or areas of sustainable use. There are 56 million hectares of land currently in limbo, without any defined status, making them vulnerable to deforestation.”

Paulo Moutinho is a senior deforestation researcher at the Amazon Institute for Environmental Research in Brasília.

Mohammed Yahia **(1982–2023)**



We at *Nature* were saddened to hear of the sudden death of our former colleague Mohammed Yahia at the age of 41. Mohammed joined what would become Nature Portfolio in 2010 and was the launch editor and latterly the executive editor of Nature Middle East. Besides spearheading the launch of Arabic-language editions of both *Nature* and *Scientific American*, he played a leading part in the inception of Nature Africa and Nature Italy. He left to take up a new position as editor-in-chief of *Chemical & Engineering News* this month. He will be remembered as a passionate and committed journalist and an outstanding and pioneering mentor and educator. Our thoughts are with his wife and young family.