

The impressions of an European journalist at Curitiba Congress

By Tim Hirsch, Environment Correspondent for BBC News, just starting a sabbatical year in Brazil.

Driving from São Paulo to Curitiba to attend the Protected Areas Congress, I was struck by what a subjective thing natural beauty is.

As the BR 116 climbs out of the Vale da Ribeira into the Serra do Mar and the Paraná plateau beyond, the scenery constantly takes your breath away. The green hillsides dotted with the occasional palm tree rising up to peaks swathed in cloud, whitewashed cottages with red tiled roofs, contented cattle grazing in the cool drizzle – it is an idyllic pastoral landscape with that touch of the exotic to excite European emotions.

So why does this European (a Briton so far from home can hardly make an issue of the small sliver of water separating us from the mainland) view the scene with such mixed feelings?

Having the misfortune to know a little about the recent history of the *Mata Atlantica*, I cannot look at these mountains without transposing onto them in my mind the rich abundance of nature which would have covered them not so many years ago, helped with this mental picture by those stretches of the journey where the road is still lined by lush expanses of forest.

There is, therefore, a kind of guilty sadness about this journey, guilt arising both from having to admit that the degraded landscape in front of me is really very picturesque, and from recognising that the sadness which tempers my enjoyment of the scenery has more than a touch of hypocrisy about it.

A drive through the Scottish Highlands would present much the same mixture of grassland and forest, though the trees would very likely be non-native pine plantations rather than anything approaching “natural” vegetation. Yet I have never had any problems appreciating the beauty of Scotland’s scenery.

The main difference, of course, between the hills of Britain and the mountains of Eastern Brazil is that whereas the Atlantic Forest still harbours remnants of a world unaltered by Man, the British environment has been so comprehensively transformed over two millennia or even longer, that what we see as “natural” is in fact a managed landscape. The primeval pre-Roman Britain in which a squirrel was said to have been able to cross the country without touching the ground is a kind of distant dream-time, irrelevant to the fierce current arguments about the future of the British countryside.

So when I look with disapproval at the bare hillsides along the BR116, I am conscious of displaying some of that Northern imperialistic arrogance which says to the South, we may have trashed our own environment on the road to industrial wealth, but now the world knows better and you have to preserve your natural areas. Do as we say, not as we do.

Four days at the Curitiba congress convinced me, however, that Brazil needs no patronising lectures from outside about the urgent need to conserve what is left of the country's vast biological wealth. On display within the smart Estação Convention Centre was a youthful army of committed Brazilians ready to confront their own past and present in a pragmatic battle for the survival of their natural heritage.

Not that I was under any illusions that this was a representative sample of Brazilian society. As the lectures themselves constantly pointed out, the fight to set aside areas for the preservation of nature has to overcome deeply-held cultural attitudes formed by the nation's history, in which wilderness was a boundless frontier waiting to be conquered and converted into something more lucrative.

Nowhere was this reflected more eloquently than in José Augusto Pádua's observations about a television advertisement in which a farmer proudly shows his son the vast soy plantations he will inherit, and boasts that when he came there twenty years ago there was "nothing" – by which he meant there was "only" *cerrado*, the uncharismatic but biologically rich Brazilian savannah.

There is surely nothing uniquely Brazilian about this attitude. Is it so different from the pioneer spirit of the settlers of the American West, determined to tame the prairies and deserts (and forcibly displace their indigenous inhabitants)? Not surprisingly, American speakers to the congress such as the champion of the national park system Alfred Runte were careful to acknowledge to this audience that their own compatriots had left so little of their own ecosystems, while Brazil at least had the opportunity to save the substantial wild areas which remain.

In Europe, too, fifty years of the Common Agricultural Policy has had a devastating impact on biodiversity, positively encouraging farmers to remove those refuges of nature such as hedges and marshland in order to maximise food production. That is thankfully now being reversed with new subsidies for environment-friendly land management, but we are hardly in a position to preach.

What was impressive about the Curitiba congress was to see this "green" movement concentrating on rigorous scientific, social and economic arguments to inform their actions, rather than the slogans and protest politics which often accompany environmental groups elsewhere. These were people "out there" in all parts of Brazil, working in the field to improve things rather than just shouting on the sidelines.

It may not have the drama of a Greenpeace occupation of an oil rig, but meticulous research can be a powerful weapon – look at Carlos Young's rigorous demolition of the myth that deforestation brings jobs. His analysis of more than six hundred municipalities in the Atlantic Forest Region shows that if anything, the reverse is true, with the areas most comprehensively stripped of nature often ranking the highest in the unemployment league.

I was recently able to witness for myself the most extreme example of Young's point on a visit to Alagoas, where five centuries of sugar planting and cattle rearing has left just tiny remnants of forest, and some of the worst poverty in Brazil.

At times the lectures could be profoundly depressing and scary – watching José Maria Cardoso Silva of Conservation International run a sequence of maps showing the shrinking of the interior Atlantic Forest and Cerrado in relatively recent years, and the projections for the advancing frontier of the Amazon, it was tempting to think of the emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned. Certainly I found plenty of people at the Congress who felt this was pretty much the position of the current Brazilian government.

Driving back along the BR 116 to São Paulo, I viewed the denuded hillsides with equal sadness, but a little less guilt. The battle for Brazil's environmental future is being played out within the country – and if anyone is going to check the seemingly unstoppable consumption of this vast nation's natural spaces, it is the generation of committed students and professionals gathered in Curitiba last week.