

**Crossfeld, S. (1997, May 25). A World Pact Reduced to Ashes: Rhetoric of Environmental Resolve has not Translated into Action. [The Boston Globe](#), pp. A1, 26.**

## OVERVIEW

Paragominas, Brazil, lies 3° below the equator, amidst the world's largest rainforest. From a plane the patches of decimated forest are enough to break the heart of an environmentalist. Along the streets, children sweating in 100° heat and choking in winds of charcoal smoke and dust can anger those who care for the welfare of the next generation.

Although Brazil hosted the [Earth Summit](#) (the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in 1992), its government has not been able to live up to its plans for monitoring forest devastation. Its environmental offenses do not match those of the United States, but concern about its forest—the world's largest absorber of carbon dioxide (and now 18% destroyed)—is growing. The Brazilian government recently reported that none of the 34 Paragominas logging companies passed minimum requirements set by the regulatory [ITTO](#) (International Tropical Timber Organization).

Pollution in Paragominas is so bad that three of every four residents suffer a respiratory disease.

In Paragominas, in the northern state of Para, everyday looks like doomsday; although half the sawmills are already gone in search of cheaper and closer wood. It is impossible to tell where the smoke ends and the clouds begin. There are no water services, no lights, no garbage collection, and no sewers—only wood huts with mud floors built within feet of the ovens.

In the charcoal camps, the cremation of the rainforest is methodical. Tree trunks are stacked like toothpicks, chopped, burned, raked, and transported to power massive pig iron factories.

The Brazilian government has progressive environmental and child labor legislation, but this has not adequately curbed abuses in either area. A program that pays children an amount equal to possible salaries to stay in school is not working in Paragominas. Monitoring child labor in charcoal

production, Sonia Levi of the [UN's International Labor Office](#) says:

It's hard work and hazardous conditions. They (young children) work directly with fire. Their bodies are impregnated with charcoal dust. They have physical problems, problems with their lungs, they carry very heavy loads of wood. They have back problems. It must be hell.

The pictures of children that accompany this article are poignant. Antonio, 15, wipes sweat, sawdust, and smoke from his burning eyes with mud-caked hands and arms. He wears only shorts, and doesn't even look up as he answers the interviewer:

'I don't go to school. I can't read and I can't write. I build the ovens, but I don't get paid. I want to get out of here, but I can't.'

Mario is only 11, but says he works three hours a day without pay for his father. His job is to rake charcoal out of the igloo-shaped ovens with a pitchfork.

'I have a fever and malaria. (He says matter-of-factly, and then adds as a lumber truck roars by...) I'd like some day to be a driver.'

Elaine, 14, is lucky enough to be in school, which may have made her, at this point, more critical than understanding:

'People here are stupid. They think this is a life and that it is enough. There's very few that want better. People are afraid to try and do another thing. There are many boys here who don't go to school. I want to be a teacher. My brother is there to work in charcoal and he thinks the charcoal is forever.'

Just three miles from this shanty town and the charcoal ovens, wealthy teenagers visit the mall in their designer jeans, purchase clothes, cosmetics and music items, and select a snack from among twenty flavors of Amazon fresh-fruit ice cream. According to the [World Bank](#), Brazil has the largest disparity between rich and poor in all the world.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

- What most impresses you in this article? What do you want to discuss?

- To what extent should national governments and world agencies work to protect the rights of children? What do you consider to be the rights of all children?
- Consider all the economic factors and actors in the drama of deforestation and child labor abuses. They include wealthy Brazilian businessmen, government officials, middle class bureaucrats, subsistence workers, and American and global citizens, their bankers and politicians. The debt demanded by the developed nations is another important factor.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

- No education is complete if it is not a global education. We must decide if the goal of education is to raise the living standards of individuals and each particular country or whether it is to bring about a more just global community. Schools and youth work must make some effort toward global understanding.
- Children suffering anywhere impinge on the quality of all our lives. To neglect our children, or children anywhere, is to deny our human commitment.
- Term papers in school and programs for youth groups should include such issues as these.

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