

## Editorial

# Denialism as a political force and sustainability setbacks

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From the perspective of sustainability and environmental concerns, the world is currently experiencing a difficult moment. Extremist governments, disengaged from long-term thinking, have taken scientific denialism to extremes – a phenomenon already evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the United States, President Trump neutralised the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a landmark of environmental regulation established in 1970. Significant progress, for instance, in the field of energy transition, is now being reversed. Fossil fuels have once again become a governmental priority, while subsidies for renewable energy are being withdrawn. Within the European Union, although not as radically, the agendas of influential right-wing political forces also threaten to undermine progress in addressing environmental challenges. In Argentina, President Milei is undermining public institutions, compromising their regulatory capacities. Armed conflicts are provoking both human and environmental devastation across different regions of the planet.

In Brazil, agribusiness lobbies have aligned with political representatives seeking a relaxation of environmental legislation to enable oil exploration at the mouth of the Amazon River. The outcome was the approval, in Parliament, of a bill of law that dismantles important instruments underpinning environmental policy. This 2159/2021 bill has therefore been widely recognised as the “*Devastation Bill*”.

But why has this bill generated such strong opposition from environmentalist sectors and from a civil society concerned with global sustainability, as well as with the rights of indigenous peoples and traditional communities? Let us briefly consider only some examples among the many setbacks to socio-environmental legislation in Brazil.

For instance, Article 61 of the bill amends Law No. 9,985 of 18 July 2000, which established the National System of Nature Conservation Units, by suppressing a sentence from Article 36, § 3. The removal of the phrase “*the licensing referred to in the head of this article may only be granted with the authorisation of the body responsible for its administration*” eliminates the possibility for the authority in charge of the Conservation Unit to veto licensing procedures.

Another controversial measure proposed in the bill is the introduction of the Licence by Adhesion and Commitment (LAC) for activities or enterprises classified simultaneously as “small or medium-sized and of low or medium polluting potential”. This self-declaratory licence allows the entrepreneur themselves to attest to the viability of the installation, expansion, or operation of an activity by simply submitting a declaration of adhesion and commitment to requirements pre-established by the licensing authority. According to the *Observatório do Clima* (Climate Observatory)<sup>1</sup>, the bill would enable the use of the LAC for projects such as the B1 dam at the Córrego do Feijão mine in Brumadinho, Minas Gerais, whose collapse in 2019 triggered a cascade failure of dams B-IV and B-IV-A and released approximately 12 million cubic metres of waste into the Paraopeba River, killing hundreds of people.

A third reason for protest concerns the proposed repeal of provisions of the Atlantic Forest Law (§§ 1 and 2 of Article 14 of Law No. 11,428/2006). These provisions require authorisation from the competent

state environmental authority, with prior approval, where applicable, from the federal or municipal environmental body, for the clearance of primary and secondary vegetation at an advanced stage of regeneration. The bill also revokes the requirement for prior state approval of municipal authorisations in cases of clearance of vegetation at an intermediate stage of regeneration in urban areas. Removing this “double control” mechanism represents a serious setback for the protection of the Atlantic Forest biome.

A fourth example of regression introduced by this bill concerns environmental licensing procedures, which would require consultation with representative bodies only in the case of already homologated indigenous lands and titled territories of quilombola communities. In other words, for environmental licensing, consultations would be disregarded in cases involving indigenous communities inhabiting lands still pending homologation, or traditional communities undergoing titling processes. The people and communities affected, as well as organisations representing them, such as the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), have expressed strong opposition to this bill.

A fifth example is the creation of a Special Environmental Licence (LAE), a new simplified licensing procedure that, in the view of the *Observatorio do Clima*, is politically driven and vulnerable to undue influence. It would even apply to enterprises subject to Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), under a single-phase procedure granting all necessary licences simultaneously.

Under pressure from civil society, President Lula vetoed 63 provisions of the new legislation. These vetoes sought to preserve respect for national standards and procedures in licensing by all federative entities; to block attempts to remove the special protection regime for the Atlantic Forest regarding the clearance of native forest; to exclude provisions restricting consultations with bodies responsible for protecting indigenous peoples and quilombola communities solely to already homologated lands; to ensure the participation of conservation unit management bodies in licensing processes affecting their territories or buffer zones; and to restrict the use of the LAC solely to enterprises of low polluting potential, thereby excluding medium-impact activities from simplified licensing.

The Federal Government vetoed the single-phase procedure proposed for the Special Environmental Licence, but did not abolish the modality altogether. Indications are that the government intends to implement the LAE by provisional measure, to be applied immediately rather than waiting six months for the Bill 2159/2021 to take effect.

The fact that there was a partial presidential veto represents, on the one hand, a victory of resistance against initiatives aimed at expanding and accelerating environmental devastation. On the other hand, it does not bring the process to an end. Following the publication in the *Diário Oficial da União* of the partial sanction of Bill 2159/2021—now promulgated as Law No. 15,090 of 8 August 2025, including the vetoed provisions—and the forwarding of a presidential message to the National Congress within 48 hours, specifying the grounds for the veto, the National Congress has 30 consecutive days to deliberate on it.

By the time this editorial is published, we may still be awaiting the outcome of a possible congressional override of the presidential veto, or we may already have a definitive resolution.

What is clear, however, is that despite the socio-environmental advances of recent decades, and the supposed global awareness of the urgent need to safeguard the environment in the face of climate change, the risks of regression—in environmental, social, and political domains—remain evident.

The convening of COP30 in Brazil, or the UN’s thematic alerts such as the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) or the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development (2024–2033), appear to have limited effect. The dismantling of legal mechanisms for the protection of the environment, indigenous peoples, and traditional communities, and even of democracy itself—guided by vested interests and sustained by denialist rhetoric—remains a deeply discouraging reality for sustainability.

In the Brazilian case, it must also be recognised that the presidential veto reflects more than governmental weakness vis-à-vis the conservative dominance in Congress. It also reveals the government's own interest in advancing oil exploration in the Equatorial Margin, maintaining the Special Environmental Licence (LAE) created by the Bill. Behind the retreat from energy transition lies the short-term ambition of politicians seeking to channel potential royalties from oil extraction.

A shadow of difficult times hangs over the near future.

Sustainability in Debate remains firmly committed to defending planetary sustainability, aligning itself with movements of enlightenment and resistance against the conservative tide, and publishing scientific works that deepen the debate on sustainability, in direct opposition to the denialist agenda.

In this edition, reflections on governance and environmental policies stand out, such as Lucena and Zakia's analysis of CONAMA Resolution No. 507/2024 on forest management in the Caatinga, and Silvino *et al.*'s study of governance narratives in Brazilian environmental arenas. Corporate and territorial sustainability also receives attention, whether in Kanda and Bandeira's critical assessment of Natura S.A.'s sustainability reports between 2020 and 2023, or in the work of Santos and Lucas who, by applying agrarian diagnoses and the MESMIS method in Pará, identify low social and environmental indices but highlight the resilience associated with family labour and productive diversification.

Social and environmental justice issues are also addressed. Polidoro and Oliveira propose the Housing Deficit Index (HDI), based on the 2022 Census, which incorporates water, sanitation, and solid waste, and reveals regional, urban, and racial inequalities in access to infrastructure. Sentilles *et al.* examine the community response to the 2019 oil spill in Bahia, highlighting the mobilisation of artisanal fishers and their vulnerabilities in the face of absent governmental action. In a similarly critical vein, Cazeiro *et al.* analyse the "necropolitics of the winds" in rural communities in Pernambuco, exposing the worsening of health conditions—particularly mental health—associated with the implementation of wind farms.

The relationship between knowledge, food, and ways of life appears in Oliveira *et al.*, who explore climate dialogues in Novo Airão and demonstrate the value of integrating local and scientific knowledge, and in Buôgo *et al.*, who analyse 23 recommendations for sustainable diets, recognising their importance while also pointing out the challenges of feasibility in self-cultivation and supply. Finally, the connections between nature, culture, and conservation emerge in Teles *et al.*'s analysis of sustainable tourism narratives on Instagram among Hispanic centennials, where representations are predominantly nature-centred, and in Gemim *et al.*'s study, which recorded 350 species in agroforestry systems in the Ribeira Valley, highlighting their role in food security and ethnoconservation.

We wish you all an enjoyable read.

## NOTES

1 | <https://www.oc.eco.br/analise-tecnica-defende-veto-integral-do-pl-2159-inconstitucional-e-incompativel-com-o-interesse-publico/> (acesso em 10/8/2025)