

War on Drugs Exacerbates Climate Crisis, New Report Finds

New Report Shows Drug Prohibition Is a Major Driver of the Climate Crisis, Advocates Say

A groundbreaking report by international researchers and policy experts argues that drug prohibition directly contributes to environmental degradation and exacerbates the climate crisis. Titled *From Forest to Dust: Socioeconomic and Environmental Impacts of the Prohibition of the Coca and Cocaine Production Chain in the Amazon Basin and Brazil*, the 100-plus-page study was produced by the Intersection – Land Use, Drug Policy and Climate Justice coalition, a collaboration of numerous NGOs and environmental advocacy groups.

The report contends that reforming drug policy and implementing “ecological harm reduction” measures are essential steps toward climate justice, and calls for legal regulation of coca that prioritizes Indigenous communities and family farms, rather than merely replacing traffickers with corporate control.

Historical and Geographical Scope Highlights Coca’s Complex Role in South America

The study spans centuries and continents from Spanish colonial rule to modern-day Brazil, and from the jungles of Brazil to ports in West Africa. It emphasizes coca’s traditional role in Indigenous cultures as a spiritual, medicinal, and communal plant. The researchers argue that the rise of the cocaine industry and strict prohibition policies have disrupted these practices, causing widespread social and environmental harm.

Brazilian journalist and human rights activist Rebeca Lerer, editor and coordinator of the report, explained the environmental consequences: “When armed conflict or the military arrive, coca moves to more remote areas, pushing the frontier of production into forest-covered regions. Authorities then eradicate coca, which is often replaced by mining or cattle ranching projects.”

Cocaine Trade Finances and Fuels Other Environmentally Destructive Industries

The report highlights the cocaine trade’s connection to other illicit and environmentally destructive industries. Cocaine operations provide infrastructure and financing for illegal logging, fishing, and wildlife trafficking. Lerer describes cocaine trafficking in the Amazon as functioning like an “investment bank” for environmental crime, facilitating activities that accelerate deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Moreover, efforts to repress trafficking often result in the “balloon effect,” where closing one route simply shifts production and transport to ecologically sensitive areas. This cycle increases deforestation, displaces

Indigenous communities, and escalates violence without reducing global consumption.

Prohibition Disrupts Traditional Coca Cultivation While Fueling Illegal Trade

David Restrepo, research lead at the Universidad de los Andes' Center for Studies on Drugs and Security, details coca's traditional cultural significance across the Andes, including among the Nasa people in Colombia and Quechua-speaking communities in Peru and Bolivia.

However, modern prohibition policies have overshadowed these cultural practices, driving coca into fragile ecosystems. Restrepo critiques initiatives like Plan Colombia, arguing that U.S.-backed anti-trafficking efforts reshuffled and dispersed coca cultivation, often into ecologically vulnerable areas with minimal state oversight. Data cited in the report shows potential coca yields doubled from 4.1 tons per hectare in 2013 to 8.5 tons in 2023, with significant environmental consequences.

Brazil Emerges as a Key Player in Cocaine Production Amid Rising Environmental Costs

The report notes that Brazil is now an emerging hub for cocaine manufacturing, domestic supply, and global export, with organized groups like the Red Command and Capital's First Command taking leading roles.

Forest loss associated with coca cultivation has doubled over the past decade, while processing chemicals—gasoline, sulfuric acid, ammonia, and acetone—contaminate soils and waterways, causing harm to aquatic life. Lerer emphasized that prohibition prevents regulation of waste and environmental safeguards, compounding the climate impacts of illicit production.

Narco-Deforestation and Narco-Mining Tie Cocaine to Broader Environmental Destruction

Thiago Godoi Calil of the University of São Paulo and the Mãe Crioula Institute documented the rise of narco-deforestation and narco-mining, linking cocaine trafficking to illegal logging, wildlife smuggling, and land grabs. The report details instances from 2017-2021 where cocaine shipments were concealed within illicit lumber destined for Europe.

Researchers estimate that global cocaine production of 3,708 tons in 2023 produced roughly 2.19 billion tons of carbon dioxide, encompassing deforestation, chemical processing, waste disposal, and transportation. Prohibition, the report notes, ensures that these activities occur without environmental oversight.

The Cocaine Trade Serves as a Financial Engine for Broader Illicit Economies

The multi-billion-dollar cocaine industry is described as an "investment bank" for extractive and criminal enterprises. Armed groups and traffickers leverage the trade to finance illegal mining, logging, and other environmentally harmful activities while corrupting officials to avoid oversight.

In Brazil, the refinement sector alone generates up to \$6 billion annually, nearly six times larger than the Amazon Fund, a government-managed program designed to combat deforestation. The researchers argue that

prohibition amplifies environmental destruction and human rights abuses while leaving climate policy blind to a major driver of ecological harm.

Experts Call for Ecological Harm Reduction and Legal Reform With Environmental Safeguards

Jenna Rose Astwood and Clemmie James of the International Coalition on Drug Policy Reform and Environmental Justice advocate for “ecological harm reduction”, combining drug policy reform with environmental protection. They caution that simply legalizing coca or cocaine without safeguards could replicate harms through corporate capture, unsustainable agriculture, and exploitation of vulnerable communities.

Recommended measures include:

- Sustainable farming practices such as permaculture and companion planting.
- Responsible land, water, and energy use to protect ecosystems.
- Ensuring food security and diversified livelihoods for rural communities.
- Moving processing and refining to urban areas for better waste control.
- Labor protections, including safe working conditions and fair wages.
- Land reforms to restore traditional territories and enable community-led redevelopment.

Indigenous and Community-Led Approaches Key to Climate and Social Justice

The report emphasizes that Indigenous knowledge and communal stewardship offer models for integrating environmental sustainability into coca production. Lerer said, “We need to start by freeing the coca leaf—from there we should design this trade through an ecological harm reduction lens and avoid corporate capture.”

Researchers argue that a just transition to regulated markets must reduce the influence of extractive and criminal economies, while ensuring protection for workers, ecosystems, and Indigenous peoples who depend on these lands.

Conclusion: Drug Policy Reform Is Critical to Climate Justice and Protecting the Amazon

From Forest to Dust makes a compelling case that prohibition-driven cocaine trade is a significant driver of deforestation, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. The report warns that climate goals cannot be met without addressing drug policy, calling for legal reform that prioritizes ecological sustainability, community well-being, and Indigenous sovereignty.

By centering legal regulation on environmental and social safeguards, the authors argue, the international community can reduce both the human and ecological costs of the global drug trade turning a centuries-old cycle of criminalization into an opportunity for climate and social justice.

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