

Salvage Biology?

A Commentary on the Sociotechnical Imaginaries of Bioeconomy, Tech 4.0 and Markets in the Amazon

Abstract

Very few forests take up as much space in contemporary Western imagination as the Amazon. It is the archetypal mythological forest that many people want to save, and even more people want to exploit. Over the years it has been the object of multiple campaigns to ‘save the rainforest’ from resource extraction both within South America and beyond; within scientific communities as well as broader publics. This commentary addresses a concern with the Amazon promoted by Brazilian scientists who have allied themselves with well-intended tech industry initiatives and small-scale entrepreneurs depending on the resources of the forest. The current ‘scramble’ for the Amazon is thus dominated by attempts to reconcile the opposing views of the forest as an economic asset and as an object to be preserved. This part collaboration, part competition, is driven by aims to promote biodiversity, to alleviate global climate change, or to help the indigenous peoples of the forest. But these different intentions are not always shared, nor are their views of the forest, and of what needs to be done to save it (or exploit it). We suggest that to understand contemporary approaches to the Amazon, we must focus on processes that have supported the development of a whole ‘entrepreneurial ecosystem’ of technoscientific research into the Amazon. We ask the question of how this research views the forest through the opportunities presented by new digital technologies and how it relates to the needs and wants of those living in and with the forest.

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