

Health & Science

Use the Amazon's natural bounty to save it: Experts

VATICAN CITY: Brazilian prize-winning climatologist Carlos Nobre is calling for a bioeconomic plan to save the Amazon by drawing on its wealth of berries and nuts — an idea championed at a key Vatican summit. “The Amazon has great economic potential”, said Nobre, who has studied the tropical habitat for 40 years and contributed to a scientific report for the special three-week assembly of Catholic bishops on the Pan-Amazonian region.

Bioeconomy is the production of renewable biological resources which are used in products such as food and medicines. “The forest generates more valuable products for the present and the future than could be gained by destroying it and replacing it with agricultural or mining land,” Nobre told AFP. “Science must seek solutions and not just talk about risks. We have to create an economy to keep the forest standing,” he said, adding that the possibilities were “endless” and would benefit indigenous people too.

Nobre was the lead author of the IPCC report into climate change, which won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Some 42 international scientists drew up recommendations and compiled facts for the assembly or “synod” at the Vatican. The Amazon’s natural bounty — plants, bacteria, mosses, and lichens — could be used in the pharmaceutical, food or cosmetics sectors if investments were made in the creation of high-value bio-industries and technologies, they say. The forest boasts acai berries (with medicinal properties), babassu palm trees (oil used in cosmetics), chestnuts and cocoa.

‘A revolution’

Strict ecological standards could be set for the harvesting of such resources, while protecting the rights of local populations. “For a middle class to emerge in the Amazon, forest products need to be given added value,” said Nobre, a guest at the

assembly, which has called for more to be done to protect the region’s indigenous peoples. “We need an industrial and scientific revolution”, he said. The rainforest is home to between 10 and 15 percent of the world’s biodiversity. Environmental campaigner Pope Francis has long insisted on the inextricable link between humans and nature. The assembly has heard from indigenous peoples and international experts on the fate of locals who are threatened — and sometimes murdered — by economic predators. Felicio de Araujo Pontes, a Brazilian prosecutor who specialises in defending indigenous peoples, criticized “a colonialist mentality that persists with the idea of superiority over the people of the forest”. He slammed an economy based on intensive cattle breeding and soy cultivation, agreeing with fellow experts that “from an economic point of view, it is worth keeping the forest standing”. Amazon soy is widely used as feed for cattle, pigs and poultry.

‘Gold hunters, miners’

Brazilian Archbishop Roque Paloschi said land grabbing had left some communities with nothing. “The 1988 constitution said that by 1993 all indigenous peoples’ lands were to be defined, approved and registered. “One third of them were, the others were invaded by gold hunters, and mining, oil and timber industries,” he said. Nobre warned time was running out for the Amazon, which is spread over nine of the twelve countries of South America. “Science shows we are very close to a point of no return,” he said, adding that some “60 to 70 percent of the Amazonian forest could disappear in the next 30 to 50 years”. “We must slam the breaks on logging and achieve zero deforestation in the coming years. And we must fight global warming,” said Nobre. Some 15 percent of the forest has already disappeared due to deforestation and fires, many of which are intentionally lit. — AFP

Humanity still risks hunger ‘crises’: Report

PARIS: Despite producing more food than it can consume, humanity risks a menacing mix of “food crises” brought on by social inequalities, environmental degradation, climate change and wars, a UN report warned Friday. After decades of steady decline, the number of people who suffer from hunger worldwide has been slowly increasing since 2015, said the report by the UN’s Food and Agriculture (FAO) Organization, the European Commission and France’s CIRAD agricultural research centre.

Last year, more than 820 million people went hungry. A key obstacle is unequal access: while some people throw away food they buy too much of, others cannot afford or find the nutrition they need, said the report entitled “Food Systems at Risk.” “The available food on the planet amounts to just under 3,000 kilocalories per person per day, while the nutritional needs of the population is estimated at about 2,200 kilocalories,” said Sandrine Dury, an economist involved in the research.

There was also the question of quality, with too many people relying on calories from fat and sugar which are poor in vitamins and minerals. People increasingly “suffer from obesity and dietary deficiencies at the same time”, Dury said. The report, presented to the FAO in Rome, warned that the problem of poor nutrition “will only get worse if current trends are not reversed.” The risks are many and multiplying. The global population will expand from 7.7 billion in 2019 to 8.5 billion in 2030, mostly in already hungry Africa and Asia, piling pressure on limited available resources. Urban populations will grow by 50 percent by 2030, while rural ones by more than 20 percent in some countries.

Migration fuelled by conflicts and natural disasters, in turn worsened by global warming, will further exacerbate the situation, the report said. “In general, food systems which are unsteady due to low food production capacities, low resilience, high pressure on resources and political insecurity generate more migrations and displacements,” it said.

As more and more people are lifted out of poverty, there has been a higher demand for animal food products, the report noted. This, in turn, has contributed to deforestation to make way for farms growing animals and their feed. In a vicious cycle, shrinking forests mean fewer trees to absorb planet-warming carbon dioxide, accelerating climate change. — AFP

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