

“Rezoning” in Brazil Opens Endangered Atlantic Forest to Development

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The already-vanishing *Mata Atlântica*, or Atlantic Forest, of southeastern Brazil is being prepared for auction under the government’s Ecological-Economic Zoning (ZEE) program. First created in 2004 and under revision since 2014, ZEE’s powers are divided between national, state, and local governments, and it is currently being used at all levels to open up previously protected lands for the construction of homes and businesses.ⁱ This is accomplished by changing area zoning classifications from Z2 (more preserved) to Z4 (more urbanized). The difference between the two is that tracts of land classified as Z2 can only be deforested up to 20 percent of their total area, and condominiums are not allowed; under Z4 the deforestation limit is raised to 40 percent and the condominium ban is lifted. These changes are expected to be applied under new proposals along the entire northern Atlantic coast of the state of São Paulo, but the point of most contention there is in Ubatuba, a beach area that is popular with tourists. Estimates vary, but the section of Ubatuba that borders Paraty, Rio de Janeiro (another important tourist attraction) is predicted to see up to an increase in construction of up to 50 percent.ⁱⁱ

Atlantic Forest

The Atlantic Forest is important for a number of reasons. A combination of coastal mangroves, low-lying sandy-soil vegetation called *restinga*, and high-altitude savannahs, the Atlantic Forest once covered 17 of Brazil’s 26 states. Long destroyed for the logging industry and to make room for agriculture and the sprawl of Brazil’s largest cities, today only 22 percent of its original area remains, and only seven percent of what is left is well-preserved.ⁱⁱⁱ It is the most endangered ecosystem in Brazil, even more so than the Amazon.^{iv} Even in its reduced state, the Atlantic Forest contains around 35 percent of all known plant species in Brazil, and has more floral diversity than North America or Europe. Naturally many of these species are also in danger of extinction.^v Without the Atlantic Forest, Brazil faces ever-mounting problems with water tables, soil fertility, erosion, and climatic balance.

Rezoning in Ubatuba

The implementation of ZEE rezoning in Ubatuba will incentivize building and urbanization in areas where the only existing human developments are traditional fishermen’s villages. Rezoning will pave the way for the immediate clearing of Atlantic Forest and, later on, further environmental degradation during construction projects—especially when done without following proper procedures in the absence of sufficient

infrastructure. Proponents of the plan maintain that Atlantic Forest areas will face more danger if the zoning changes are not approved and that urbanization would in fact guarantee the preservation of natural resources, while also providing much-needed sanitary improvements for the region. Critics, on the other hand, point out that the former is counterintuitive (if not an outright lie used by developers to push their projects through) and the latter is a widespread problem throughout Brazil whose lack of resolution in much larger markets like Rio de Janeiro does not inspire much confidence that it will be fixed in Ubatuba. As they point out, the people have “seen this movie before,” all along the coast of Brazil—and it always ends favoring large companies and speculators.^{vi} Indeed, historical precedent suggests that these projects will end in the marginalization of the original inhabitants and the appearance of slums (*favelas*) on the outskirts. Locals are concerned about the overall lack of transparency during this process and environmental groups assert that only real estate developers were present on the committees that work with the government to address rezoning.^{vii} The community is divided on this issue, with residents on one side and construction and tourism interests on the other.^{viii}

All state zoning changes receive final approval or veto from São Paulo state Governor Geraldo Alckmin, of Brazil’s Social Democrat Party (PSDB)—the traditional opposition to former presidents “Lula” da Silva and Dilma Rousseff and their Workers’ Party (PT). The pillars of Alckmin’s long-running administration have been privatization and austerity; his environmental track record includes selling off state parks, building highways through a UNESCO biosphere reserve, and presiding over São Paulo’s water crisis.^{ix} Alckmin was recently implicated in the transnational Odebrecht scandal with the discovery of undeclared cash transfers by the construction company to his 2010 and 2014 reelection campaigns.^x

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ⁱ Eduardo Geraque, Plano permite casa e comércio em área de mata atlântica de Ubatuba, Folha de São Paulo, December 22, 2016. Accessed December 25, 2016. <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2016/12/1843632-plano-permite-casa-e-comercio-em-area-de-mata-atlantica-de-ubatuba.shtml>; OEKO, O que é o Zoneamento Ecológico-Econômico, September 2, 2013. Accessed February 12, 2017. <http://www.oeco.org.br/dicionario-ambiental/27545-o-que-o-zoneamento-ecologico-economico/>

ⁱⁱ Eduardo Geraque, Plano permite casa e comércio em área de mata atlântica de Ubatuba, Folha de São Paulo, December 22, 2016. Accessed December 25, 2016. <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2016/12/1843632-plano-permite-casa-e-comercio-em-area-de-mata-atlantica-de-ubatuba.shtml>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ministério do Meio Ambiente, Mata Atlântica. Accessed February 12, 2017. <http://www.mma.gov.br/biomas/mata-atlantica>

^{iv} Instituto Socioambiental, Governo prepara decreto que ameaça Mata Atlântica, denunciam ambientalistas, October 25, 2016. Accessed February 12, 2017. <https://www.socioambiental.org/pt-br/noticias-socioambientais/ambientalistas-denunciam-ameaca-ao-pouco-que-resta-da-mata-atlantica>

^v Ministério do Meio Ambiente, Mata Atlântica. Accessed February 12, 2017.

<http://www.mma.gov.br/biomas/mata-atlantica>

^{vi} João Lara Mesquita, Ubatuba: especulação ameaça Mata Atlântica com novo zoneamento, Mar Sem Fim, December 22, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://marsemfim.com.br/ubatuba-especulacao-ameaca-mata-atlantica/>

^{vii} Eduardo Geraque, Plano permite casa e comércio em área de mata atlântica de Ubatuba, Folha de São Paulo, December 22, 2016. Accessed December 25, 2016. <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2016/12/1843632-plano-permite-casa-e-comercio-em-area-de-mata-atlantica-de-ubatuba.shtml>

^{viii} Vanessa Cancian, EM UBATUBA-SP, NOVO ZONEAMENTO AMEAÇA COMUNIDADES TRADICIONAIS E ÁREAS DE MATA ATLÂNTICA, Negro Belchior, October 28, 2016. Accessed February 12, 2017. <http://negobelchior.cartacapital.com.br/em-ubatuba-sp-novo-zoneamento-ameaca-comunidades-tradicionais-e-areas-de-mata-atlantica/>

^{ix} PSDB SP, Entrevista do gov. Geraldo Alckmin à Veja: Austeridade dá voto. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://tucano.org.br/bancada/entrevista-do-gov-geraldo-alckmin-a-veja-austeridade-da-voto> ; Edson Domingues, Os dez maiores erros do governo Alckmin na gestão ambiental, Ambiente Legal. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://www.ambientelegal.com.br/10-maiores-erros-do-governo-alckmin-na-gestao-ambiental/> ; The Economist, Nor any drop to drink, April 26, 2014. Accessed February 14, 2017.

<http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21601280-dry-weather-and-growing-population-spell-rationing-nor-any-drop-drink?zid=309&ah=80dcf288b8561b012f603b9fd9577f0e>

^x Carta Capital, Delação da Odebrecht aumenta a pressão sobre Geraldo Alckmin, December 19, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/delacao-da-odebrecht-aumenta-a-pressao-sobre-alckmin>