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SOLVING TROPICAL DEFORESTATION THROUGH PIONEER PRIDE

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In 1984 I moved to Paragominas, a “wild west” town and *município* near the eastern margin of the Amazon forest. I went there to do research for my PhD on forest recovery in abandoned pastures and was quite focused on cutter ants, bats and spiny rats. Over the next few years, however, cattle ranchers, sawmill operators, immigrant laborers, *caboclos,* and land rights activists became the source of most of my learning. They showed me how poorly-enforced forest regulations bred a culture of graft, how land disputes were resolved by hired gunmen, and how the concept of the “public good” was theoretical at best. I learned that forest frontiers—where most of the world’s tropical deforestation is taking place—have plenty of unscrupulous, resource-grabbing opportunists. But they are also full of rugged pioneers seeking to carve an honest living from the land. These courageous farmers and entrepreneurs are often overlooked in the international discussions of deforestation, even though they are key to success. In 2008, a group of these pioneers made a bit of history. The mayor and farm leaders of Paragominas decided to eradicate deforestation--collectively. (See the graph here). In September 2013, their progress was featured in *The Economist* magazine as an example of local innovators tackling Amazon deforestation. When I asked Percio—a cattle rancher who helped drive the change—what his motivations were, he responded: “*meus filhos*” (my children). He wanted his children and grandchildren to have good lives in Paragominas. He wanted to do his part to make Paragominas a place to be proud of. He had told me the same thing in 1984 at his daughter’s first birthday party. But in 1984, the conditions weren’t right. The Brazilian government created the conditions for collective action when it established the deforestation “black list” in 2008, cutting businesses and farmers off from cheap government loans in 36 high-deforesting *municípios* of the Amazon region, including Paragominas. Collective action was necessary to come off the black list because the measure of success was the amount of total deforestation across the entire *municipio*. More than 40 square kilometers of clearing a year and your *municipio* stayed on the black list. Peer pressure to stop deforesting was intense. The pioneers who had arrived in their youth and raised their families in Paragominas mobilized when they realized that deforestation was a threat to the future of their region. Their success inspired Pará State Governor Simão Jatene to create a state-wide program to foster similar collective actions in other *municípios* that were striving to slow deforestation. The “*Programa Municípios Verdes*” was born (Green Counties Program). Pride in one’s place and community is a powerful driver of human behavior and tropical forest pioneers are no different. Pride is at the core of healthy democratic institutions and it will be the key to one day ending tropical deforestation. It takes root when there are simple mechanisms for recognizing and rewarding hard

work and good ideas that make the region a better place to live. It grows stronger when laws and regulations are fair and fairly implemented–when complying with the law becomes the norm. Pride flourishes when a region's ethnic and cultural diversity, the exuberance and beauty of its native ecosystems, and the resilience and life-sustaining production of its agriculture and forestry systems become deeply embedded in the identity of its citizenry. Pride is beaten down when pioneer landholders and courageous regional political leaders are vilified—when unscrupulous opportunists and law-abiding pioneers are all lumped together as the enemy of the forest. Creating the conditions for regional pride is a central feature of the "jurisdictional" approach to tropical deforestation. By collectively establishing goals for solving deforestation, achieving legal compliance, improving agricultural productivity and increasing economic opportunities of smallholders, achieving those targets becomes a matter of pride. When progress towards these goals generates national and international recognition, greater market access, more investment and economic opportunities—not to mention a healthier, more beautiful region to live in—the resolve to achieve those goals grows stronger. The jurisdictional approach to deforestation can make all of the key sectors winners, with the exception of those unscrupulous opportunists I mentioned earlier. Commodity buying or growing companies can lower the costs of doing business when dialogues with regional governments and farm sectors identifies and overcomes key risks and infrastructural challenges. Farm sectors can benefit through better policies that improve access to credit, deliver technical assistance, streamline licensing processes, and provide commercialization infra-structure. Communities grow stronger when their land and resource rights are recognized and their enterprises receive core support. The stewardship of the world's tropical forest landscapes will be up to the descendants of today's courageous pioneers. Give them the conditions for pride-driven collective action, and they will lead.

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