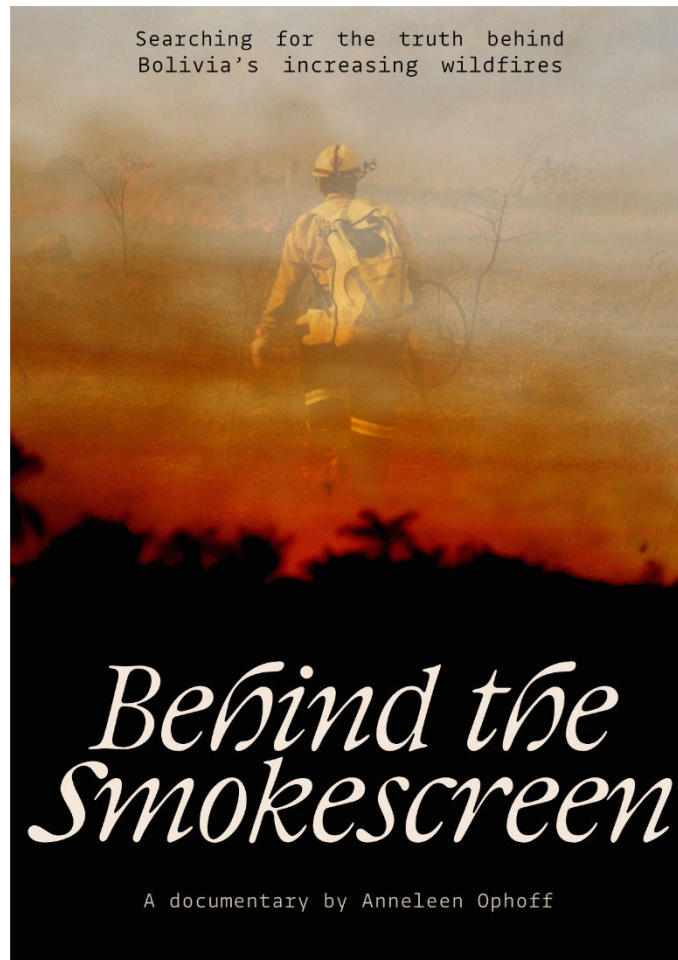




## BEHIND THE SMOKESCREEN



### STUDY GUIDE

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## Behind the Smokescreen

In the summer of 2019, images of the Amazon forest colored our television screens fiery red. Millions of hectares of rainforest burned completely. Despite international outcry, little has changed since. Deforestation of the Amazon rainforest is continuing at an increasing pace, causing droughts and heat waves. In the summer of 2024, Bolivia is battling record wildfires again, with worse likely ahead. This documentary visits indigenous communities surrounded by the annual fires, follows volunteer firefighters in their efforts to extinguish the flames, talks to farmers who practice slash-and-burn agriculture, and investigates a web of illegal land deals and political maneuvering.

## Bolivia

Bolivia is a land-locked country in the west-central part of South America. It is bordered by Brazil to the north and east, Paraguay to the southeast, Argentina to the south, Peru to the northwest, and Chile to the west. Its constitutional capital is Sucre, and its administrative capital is La Paz. Bolivia is a presidential republic.

This country has a population of more than 12 million people. According to the CIA World Factbook, 68 percent are Mestizo (defined as a mix of Indigenous and White ancestry), 20 percent are Indigenous, and 5 percent White. The CIA website notes, "Bolivia ranks at or near the bottom among Latin American countries in several areas of health and development, including poverty, education, fertility, malnutrition, mortality, and life expectancy."<sup>1</sup>

## Forests in Bolivia

It is estimated that about half of Bolivia is forest. Part of Bolivia's forested area is the Amazon, which is the largest tropical rainforest in the world. Brazil, Peru, and Columbia also contain large areas of Amazon forest. It is estimated that about 11 percent of the Amazon basin is in Bolivia. Bolivia also contains large areas of dry forest, such as the Chiquitano Dry Forests. Dry forests typically have low rainfall and seasonal dry periods.

Forests provide a long list of benefits. They can help fight climate change by absorbing carbon and regulating rainfall and temperature and they can also help mitigate the impacts of extreme weather, such as storms and floods, that are caused by climate change. In addition, forests help purify water and keep the soil fertile, and they also have some of the greatest biodiversity of any areas on earth. Finally, forests contain many resources that people depend on for their daily lives including food, material for housing, and medicine.

Old growth forests are forests that have been growing for a long period of time without being disturbed. Definitions of old growth forest vary depending on the ecosystem, but some people define an old growth forest as one with trees that are more than 150 years old. Researchers have found that old growth forests have even more benefits than other types of forests. For instance, they hold more carbon, have more diverse ecosystems and are better at cleaning soil and water.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bolivia/#geography>

## Slash and Burn Agriculture

Slash and burn agriculture is a traditional cultivation method that has been used in South America for thousands of years. With this method, farmers clear forested land and burn any vegetation that is left. The ashes provide nutrients to fertilize crops and help reduce weeds. After a few years, the fertility of the land declines and farmers move on to a new plot. If the land is left to return to forest, slash and burn agriculture can be sustainable, however, if it is left permanently deforested it can result in soil erosion and a loss of biodiversity.

In recent years there has been more criticism of slash and burn techniques due to their environmental impact. Critics argue that not only does this method of farming contribute to deforestation and a loss of biodiversity, but that the burning involved contributes to climate change. For instance, the Ecologic Development Fund insists, “Today, with more people than ever trying to survive in the midst of dwindling natural resources, the impact of slash-and-burn is particularly destructive and unsustainable. It exacerbates destructive impacts on already-fragile ecosystems and contributes to climate change.”<sup>2</sup>

## Forest Loss

Bolivia loses some of its forested area every year. In recent years, the percentage that is lost is increasing. According to a 2023 review by the World Resources Institute, in 2023 the loss of primary forest in Bolivia increased by 27 percent, which is the highest year for forest loss that has been recorded so far, a trend that Bolivia has followed for three years in a row. Among tropical countries, Bolivia ranks third for the most primary forest loss, according to the report.<sup>3</sup> According to Global Forest Watch, between 2001 and 2023, Bolivia has lost 7.97 million hectares of tree cover. It explains that this equates to a 12 percent decrease in tree cover over that period of time.<sup>4</sup> The World Resources Institute reports that while some countries—such as Brazil and Columbia—have been able to reduce deforestation in recent years, Bolivia has trended the opposite way, seeing a sharp increase in loss. It ranks Bolivia third on its list of “Top 10 countries for tropical primary forest loss in 2022 and 2023.”<sup>5</sup>

As explained by the World Resources Institute report, the two main causes of forest loss in Bolivia are fire and agricultural expansion. The reports states, “Fire continues to play a major role in the country, accounting for just over half (51%) of the primary forest loss in 2023.” It explains that many fires are related to agriculture, saying, “Forest fires in tropical nations like Bolivia are usually set by humans for agricultural purposes, such as regenerating grasslands for grazing and clearing for cropland, or to claim land. Under hot and dry conditions, those fires can spread out of control into forested areas.” In addition to fire, the report finds that agricultural expansion plays a major role in forest loss, with soy and beef being some of the major uses of the land. It says, “Soy expansion has resulted in nearly a million hectares of deforestation in the country since the turn of the century. . . . Though Bolivia has much less soy production than neighboring countries, most of its expansion has come at the expense of forests. The government continues to promote the agribusiness industry by setting ambitious

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ecologic.org/our-impact/challenges/slash-and-burn-agriculture>

<sup>3</sup> <https://research.wri.org/gfr/latest-analysis-deforestation-trends>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/BOL/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://research.wri.org/gfr/latest-analysis-deforestation-trends>

targets for soy and beef exports, promoting the expansion of biodiesel and subsidizing agricultural activity.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Forest Fires in Bolivia**

In recent years, the number and severity of forest fires in Bolivia has been increasing. According to Global Forest Watch, peak fire season in Bolivia is about 16 weeks long, starting in mid-July. It reports that as of the end of October 2024, there had been more than 46,000 fire alerts in Bolivia. It says that this is a record, stating, “This total is unusually high compared to the total for previous years going back to 2012. The most fires recorded in a year was 2024, with 46,250.”<sup>7</sup>

According to the National Committee of the Netherlands (IUCN), a large conservation organization, many areas in Bolivia have been struck multiple times by fires, which means that they do not have time to recover. For instance, it talks about the Chiquitano Dry Forest, explaining that compared to tropical forests, the dry forest can adapt to periodic fires. However, it says that recent fires recurring in the same areas are too much for even the dry forest. It says, “Frequent fires over the last two decades have pushed the resilience of the Chiquitano Dry Forest to its limits. Research shows that areas affected by fires two or more times are less resilient compared to those that burned only once.” It goes on to explain the negative impacts of these fires, stating, “Continuous fires prevent natural regeneration, alter species composition, and weaken the ecosystem’s stability. Vegetation that burns repeatedly tends to shift towards fire-tolerant species, reducing overall biodiversity.”<sup>8</sup> In 2024, Bolivia declared a national emergency due to the forest fires burning there.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How do Indigenous communities contribute to wildfires, as shown in the film?
2. How do wildfires harm Indigenous communities?
3. As shown in the film, how do government policies contribute to wildfires?
4. What is causing deforestation in Bolivia, as shown in the film?
5. How does a loss of forest harm the people of Bolivia?
6. In what ways is fire a part of daily life, as shown in the film?

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<sup>6</sup> <https://research.wri.org/gfr/latest-analysis-deforestation-trends>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/BOL/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.iucn.nl/en/blog/burning-in-silence-bolivias-forest-fires-and-its-threat-to-global-biodiversity/>

## Additional Resources

- Global Forest Watch, “Bolivia.”  
<https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/BOL/>
- James MacCarthy and Sarah Parsons, “6 Graphics Explain South America’s Forest Fires,” World Resources Institute, September 19, 2024.  
<https://www.wri.org/insights/amazon-forest-fires-2024>
- Monica Machicao and Daniel Ramos, “Bolivia Wildfires Burn Record Area, Scorching Homes and Farms,” Reuters, October 7, 2024.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bolivia-wildfires-burn-record-area-scorching-homes-farms-2024-10-07/>
- NASA, “Smoke Fills South American Skies,” September 3, 2024.  
<https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/153295/smoke-fills-south-american-skies>
- National Committee of the Netherlands, “Burning in Silence: Bolivia’s Forest Fires and its Threat to Global Biodiversity,” September 17, 2024.  
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- Joseph Zarate, “On the Fire Frontline in Bolivia,” Sumauma, September 26, 2023.  
<https://sumauma.com/en/a-floresta-ardeu-entre-nos/>

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