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Press Release

For immediate release: 11th January 2007

Brazil approves deforestation of important Amazon reserve

The State Government of Mato Grosso, Brazil, has voted to drastically reduce one of the Amazon's most biodiverse reserves. The Cristalino State Park is a world-renowned ecotourism destination that is home to over 550 species of bird, and protects endangered species like the white-whiskered spider monkey. 27,000 hectares of its forest will now be unprotected and vulnerable to logging, cattle ranching and agribusiness.

State Governor Blairo Maggi initially vetoed the reduction of the park. This was on the grounds that it would 'be seen as endorsing illegal occupancy and deforestation of public lands', and that it would suggest Brazilian environmental law can be flouted. The veto was short-lived, however, as members of the Mato Grosso House of Representatives immediately overturned it.

Environmentalists and tour operators say that the decision sets a dangerous precedent. "If sections of a reserve such as Cristalino State Park can be removed with such ease, the prospects for other protected areas within Mato Grosso are bleak," said Mark Rose, Chief Executive of Fauna & Flora International. "The decision also undermines Brazil's private reserve system that was set up to encourage landowners to conserve their properties and use them for research or tourism, guaranteeing their conservation in perpetuity".

The State Government is also set to seize a private reserve on the southern border of the park, although it lacks the funds necessary to manage it. This would supposedly compensate for the deforestation within Cristalino State Park, but would also conveniently remove groups that oppose the State Government's plans. The private reserve was established by Cristalino Lodge (a successful ecotourism business) and the Cristalino Ecological Foundation (a local environmental NGO), with the assistance of Fauna & Flora International.

Individuals closely connected to the State Government are known to have private interests in lands within the park. "Mato Grosso has suffered the highest rate of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon and yet it looks like the State Government is manipulating this particular situation for political gain" said Evan Bowen-Jones, Regional Director of Fauna & Flora International's Americas Programme.

Left untouched, Cristalino State Park has the potential to act as a regional model for ecotourism but it is being sacrificed for the short term benefit of a few powerful individuals. And at a time when climate change is occurring faster than predicted, conserving tropical forest and its unparalleled biodiversity is critical. Brazil's Federal and State governments are key players in making this happen, but Mato Grosso State seems hell-bent on removing what little forest it has left.

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To help protect Cristalino, please write to the Mato Grosso State Government through the SOS Cristalino website: http://www.soscristalino.org.br/carta_en.php

For further information, pictures and interviews:

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Notes to Editors

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) acts to conserve threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science, and take account of human needs. Founded in 1903, FFI is the longest established international conservation organization, and is currently supporting conservation through partners in more than 40 countries world-wide.

Cristalino State Park

In December 2003 FFI carried out a strategic emergency land purchase in Brazilian southern Amazonia, Mato Grosso State. This purchase was made in partnership with the Cristalino Ecological Foundation with funding from a private investment trust. Although a small area, the land purchased effectively secured the 184,000-hectare Cristalino State Park. A Brazilian conservation priorities workshop in late 2006 reconfirmed that this region lies within the highest priority category for conservation in the Brazilian Amazon. This is due to its high levels of endemism, diversity of vegetation and habitats, and the urgent need for its protection given the pressure upon it from smallholders, logging interests and large cattle ranchers.

Deforestation rates have until recently been accelerating with soya bean plantations pushing settlers northwards, threatening even greater environmental devastation in an area that supports over 550 bird species. The region's exceptional biodiversity is due to it being situated in the transition zone between the 'cerrado' (Brazilian savannah) grassland and the Amazon forest. It also lies between two of the Amazon's major tributaries, which prevents the dispersal of certain species, adding to its unique nature.

FFI has been working with local partners to protect the Cristalino State Park as a model of ecotourism that proves the potential for wider sustainable development. It has also been working with other groups to conserve the whole landscape area around it. The result has been a proposal to link the existing protected areas that Cristalino adjoins together to form the Teles Pires – Tapajos Corridor.

This 18 million-hectare area would:

- form a barrier to the continued northwards progress of the 'arc of deforestation'
- conserve complete ecosystems in one of the most biodiverse areas of Amazonia
- significantly contribute to maintaining regional and global climatic regimes