

## Colombia: 12,000 Soccer Fields of Protected Amazon Forest Lost in 2025

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Colombia's Amazon suffered another major setback in 2025. According to *El Tiempo*, three protected Amazonian national parks lost a combined forest area equivalent to approximately 12,000 soccer fields—a stark reminder that PR campaigns alone are insufficient when state authority erodes<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, the Amazonian tri-border region between Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru is facing a growing crisis driven by drug trafficking and illegal gold mining. In some areas, illegal gold has overtaken coca production as the main source of income for criminal groups, fueling violence, displacing local communities, accelerating environmental destruction, and deepening the humanitarian crisis<sup>2</sup>.

The parks are among Colombia's most valuable ecological assets. They safeguard exceptional biodiversity, sustain Indigenous communities, regulate regional water systems, and store vast amounts of carbon essential to global climate stability. Their degradation extends far beyond Colombia's borders.

The report attributes the accelerating destruction to a convergence of illegal and unsustainable activities: expanding cattle ranching, illegal land occupation, clandestine road construction, illegal mining, and other illicit economies that continue to penetrate protected territories.

The implications are profound. Forest loss inside national parks fragments ecosystems, accelerates biodiversity decline, increases greenhouse gas emissions, and weakens one of the planet's most important climate-regulating forests.

The figures also reveal a broader national trend. Colombia recorded 72,409 hectares of deforestation in 2025, approximately 6% more than in 2024, with the Amazon accounting for most of the increase. The data point to persistent structural failures in governance, territorial control, and environmental enforcement.

While the article focuses primarily on the environmental dimension, analysts argue that these outcomes cannot be understood without considering Colombia's security policy. They contend that the "*Total Peace*" deal pursued by President Gustavo Petro has reduced the

state's deterrence against illegal armed groups while allowing criminal organizations to consolidate territorial influence across remote regions.

From this perspective, expanding control by armed actors has facilitated illegal economies—including land grabbing, cattle expansion, illicit mining, and deforestation<sup>3</sup>—inside areas that should enjoy the country's highest level of environmental protection.

Supporters of the government dispute this interpretation and argue that *Total Peace* seeks to reduce violence through negotiated settlements while strengthening long-term state presence<sup>4</sup>. The relationship between the policy and rising deforestation and illegal economies therefore remains stated.

At the same time, Colombia has become a prominent international advocate for climate action. The Petro administration and his *Total Peace* associates' have promoted the country as a global leader in biodiversity protection, rainforest conservation, and the transition away from fossil fuels, messages amplified through international forums, multilateral organizations, and partnerships with environmental NGOs.

The contradiction is becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile. Internationally, Colombia is celebrated as a model of environmental leadership. Domestically, protected Amazonian forests continue to fall to illegal economies, expanding criminal control, and accelerating deforestation.

Analysts argue that this widening gap between narrative and reality has been sustained by an extensive international public relations campaign that promotes Colombia's environmental ambitions while diverting attention from what critics characterize as the Petro government's *predatory approach to environmental policy* on the ground. Allegedly backed by illegal armed and criminal groups, the campaign has helped obscure the environmental consequences of these policies.

The central question is no longer whether Colombia has embraced an ambitious environmental agenda. It is whether that agenda has translated into effective governance, territorial control, and tangible protection of the Amazon. *The evidence shows it has not.*

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<sup>1</sup> *El Tiempo*, 12,000 Soccer Fields of Protected Amazon Forest Lost in 2025, 28 July 2026, (digital edition).

<sup>2</sup> *El Tiempo*, The Amazonian Triple Border Between Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. p. 12 (print edition).

<sup>3</sup> *Semana*, One of the country's largest companies: Illegal gold mining generates more than \$8-8.5 billion USD in revenue for organized crime in 2025, equivalent to 1.9% of Colombia's GDP (pp. 64-65, printed edition).

<sup>4</sup> *El Espectador*, "This Is the Legacy of Gustavo Petro's Total Peace After Four Years in Office," July 27, 2026, pp. 4-5 (print edition), examines the outcomes of the *Total Peace* policy after four years of the Petro administration, highlighting what the newspaper characterizes as its catastrophic consequences for Colombia.