

Conserving Brazil's Atlantic forests.

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In their report “Using ecological thresholds to evaluate the costs and benefits of set-asides in a biodiversity hotspot” (29 August, p. 1041), C. Banks-Leite *et al.* calculate that Brazil could protect the most biodiverse 30% of its 143 million hectares of endangered Atlantic forests by reallocating 6.5% of its agricultural subsidies to pay landowners to set aside land for restoration. Reallocations are unlikely, however, because agrosubsidies serve different political constituencies than conservation incentives (1). Meanwhile, a successful and much cheaper stepwise program could be expanded.

The region is subdivided into small, scarcely viable, private farm holdings, which are partially forested and partially cleared. For rural properties in this biome, the current Brazilian Forest Code (2) requires 20% of the land to be set aside as protected Legal Reserves (Reservas Legais). These are managed for sustainable use, which includes selective logging. A voluntary land covenant program (3, 4) allows an owner to establish a Private Natural Heritage Reserve (Reserva Particular do Patrimônio Natural) at the federal, state, or municipal level. Private Natural Heritage Reserves must be managed only for conservation, ecotourism, or education. Because the land is already required to be set aside as a Legal Reserve, opportunity costs for establishing the more conservation-friendly Private Natural Heritage Reserves are minimal. However, landholders are deterred by application and establishment costs. The state government pays conservation incentives to municipalities but not to landholders (5). A few Private Natural Heritage Reserve landholders meet costs through ecotourism, but as yet, only 4% nationally (6).

A partnership of local and international nongovernmental organizations (7, 8) has provided strategic small grants known as editais to cover application and management costs for Private Natural Heritage Reserves. For one-third of Private Natural Heritage Reserves nationally, editais were critical in lifting landholders over this final hurdle for forest conservation. To date, this includes 57,000 ha in the Atlantic Forest biome, where the cost of this stepwise approach (7) is only 1 to 5% of the cost of outright land purchase. Expanding this approach

may provide the best practical short-term prospect to conserve remaining biodiversity in Brazil's Atlantic forests.

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