

fragile hazard

The Green Hell is in trouble.

The rain forest of the Amazon River basin gained its dramatic name from 19th century adventurers who saw themselves, machete in hand, pitted against a relentless tide of vegetation capable of swallowing them as they slept. The jungle seemed infinite, full of danger, all-powerful.

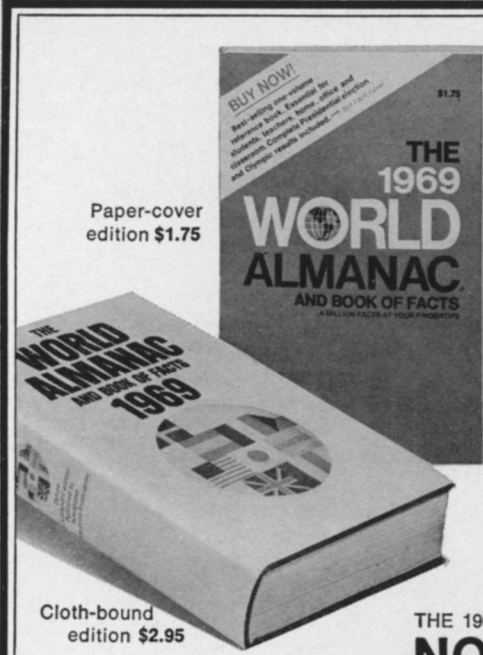
Actually the Amazonian jungle is biologically fragile, not at all capable of coming back overnight to swallow man's little fields.

Furthermore, the animals that inhabit the rain forest have shown that they are not in the endless supply that once was imagined. Whole areas of jungle, though not yet cleared for cultivation, are empty day and night of the howls of monkeys, the grunt of jaguars and the screech of parrots that figure so prominently in romantic books about Amazonia.

Curiously enough the Green Hell is rolling back in an almost complete vacuum of knowledge. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that tropical America contains a bewildering host of plant and animal species, botanists and zoologists have paid comparatively little attention to Amazonia. This lack began to be recognized early in this decade.

In 1963 a group of New World botanists formed the Association for Tropical Biology with the idea of promoting tropical American studies. Since then the scope of the ATB has been expanded to include all the tropics and all biological disciplines. Last month the organization teamed with the Government of Colombia to sponsor two meetings on the biology of Amazonia.

Science News ecology editor Christopher Weathersbee journeyed to Florencia to cover the meetings and took a field trip down the Caqueta River to see firsthand the impact of man on the rain forest. In this and subsequent issues he will write about the meetings, and about the larger issue of how man can learn to understand the jungle in time to live in harmony with it instead of destroying it.



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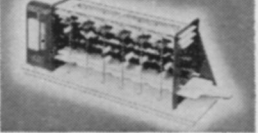
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