

## Creatures of the Clearing: Forests, People, and Ants in Imperial Brazil

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**Abstract :** This article offers a non-declensionist account of tropical deforestation, arguing that, rather than social stamp upon the environment or ecological endgame, deforestation is part of social site-making and remaking, the process through which humans produce sociality by carrying out nature-mediated – and therefore nature-transforming – practices that inevitably reset the very conditions of those practices. Human landscape-shaping inadvertently alters other species' habitats –most often decimating them, but sometimes improving them–, the outcomes of which always resonate back upon human inhabitation and land use. Despite the overall tendency of biotic homogenization resulting from modern deforestation processes, there are always winners, i.e., species that gain competitive advantages enabling them to thrive in the novel ecosystems. Here it is examined one such case of deforestation-boosted species, namely leafcutter ants, which wrought havoc in the rural landscapes of nineteenth-century Brazil by defoliating a wide range of crops. By combining Historical GIS analysis and qualitative interpretation, it is shown how agricultural deforestation might have changed the ant species' biogeographies, and how in turn these changes – construed as 'infestation' – stimulated social innovations and rearrangements such as technical ingenuity, legal-administrative practices, and even local electoral arenas.

**Keywords :** deforestation, leafcutter ants, nineteenth-century Brazil, socio-ecological change

**Conference Title :** ICGEH 2020 : International Conference on Geoarchaeology and Environmental History

**Conference Location :** Melbourne, Australia

**Conference Dates :** February 03-04, 2020