**Earthsight submission**

For many years, global attention has focused on the devastating crimes against people and the planet in the Brazilian Amazon's forests, driven by the beef and soy industries. There is a growing awareness of the need to address the impacts on the Amazon of what we eat. However, similar destruction in another crucial South American biodiversity hotspot, driven by a different commodity, has gone largely unnoticed.

South of the Amazon lies the vast Cerrado, one of the richest biomes on Earth, home to 161 mammal species, including giant anteaters, giant armadillos, jaguars, and tapirs. Millions of people depend on its forests and savannahs for their livelihoods. Yet the destruction in the Cerrado by industrial agriculture in recent decades has been worse than in the wet, dense forest to the north. About half of the biome’s native vegetation has already been lost, primarily to agribusiness expansion. While recent news from the Amazon is cautiously positive, the Cerrado's situation is worsening: deforestation rates in the biome increased by 43% in 2023 compared to the previous year.

Earthsight’s year-long investigation reveals that corporations and consumers in Europe and North America are driving this destruction in a new way—not by what they eat, but by what they wear. Earthsight discovered that cotton used by fast fashion giants H&M and Zara is linked to large-scale deforestation, land grabbing, human rights abuses, and violent land conflicts in the Brazilian Cerrado.

H&M and Inditex, which owns Zara, are the world's largest clothing companies, with combined profits of around US$41 billion in 2022. H&M operates 4,400 shops globally, while Zara and other Inditex brands—Pull&Bear, Bershka, Massimo Dutti, Stradivarius—have nearly 6,000. H&M and Zara are leaders in the fast fashion industry, producing numerous clothing collections each year.

Over the last decade, Brazilian cotton has gained prominence in the global fashion market. Brazil is now the world’s second-largest cotton exporter and is expected to overtake the US as the top supplier by 2030. From 2013 to 2023, Brazil’s cotton exports more than doubled, with almost all cotton grown in the Cerrado.

However, H&M and Zara do not buy this cotton directly. Like most Western fashion giants, they source their clothes largely from Asian suppliers who transform raw cotton into finished goods. By analyzing thousands of shipment records, Earthsight found that H&M and Zara’s suppliers source cotton from western Bahia in the Cerrado, produced by SLC Agrícola and Grupo Horita.

SLC, with 44,000ha of cotton plantations in western Bahia, is Brazil’s largest cotton producer, while Horita, operating on at least 140,000ha of farmland in the region, is among the top six. Both are owned by families believed to be among Brazil’s wealthiest, and their cotton production is linked to numerous illegalities.

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