

Protecting Nature and Serving Millions: The Atlantic Forest

Global region

Brazil, South America

Domestic region

Brazil's eastern and southeastern seaboard

Internationally Designated Areas

The Atlantic Forest Biosphere Reserve, or Mata Atlântica Biosphere Reserve

1991

Discovery Coast Atlantic Forest Reserves World Heritage Site

1999

Atlantic Forest South-East Reserves World Heritage Site

1999

Paraty and Ilha Grande – Culture and Biodiversity World Heritage Site

2019

Environmental Protection Area of Cananéia-Iguape-Peruíbe Ramsar Wetland

2017

The Mata Atlântica, or Atlantic Forest, once blanketed Brazil's eastern and southeastern seaboard, stretching deep into Argentina and Paraguay. Although now fragmented, these forests are biological treasures that continue to provide essential ecosystem services to millions of Brazilians.

Despite centuries of logging, farming, and urban growth, the remaining patchwork of around 900,000 km² is one of the world's great forest regions. The 10% of the original cover that remains is a living mosaic of mangroves, marshes, sand spits, and upland grasslands that harbour extraordinary biodiversity and high levels of endemism.

Richness in complexity and diversity

This MIDA is complex and diverse. Brazil designated the Mata Atlântica Biosphere Reserve in 1993, and the protected area spans nearly 90 million hectares across 17 states, making it the largest BR in the world. Hundreds of core zones and buffer areas function as ecological corridors that sustain wildlife from golden lion tamarins to jaguars, while over half the tree species and nearly 40% of mammals are found nowhere else.

UNESCO further recognised the ecosystem's global value in 1999 with the Discovery Coast Atlantic Forest Reserves World Heritage Site. Spanning 112,000 ha across Bahia and Espírito Santo, its rainforests and restingas reveal extraordinary endemism, blending Atlantic species with Amazonian elements, making the region a treasure trove for scientists seeking insights into evolutionary adaptation and resilience.

The Atlantic Forest South-East Reserves World Heritage Site was created in the same year to protect 25 areas across Paraná and São Paulo. Twenty years later, in 2019, the Paraty and Ilha Grande mixed World Heritage Site highlighted both the natural riches of the forest and the cultural heritage of Brazil's coastal towns. Together with numerous Ramsar Wetlands like Cananéia-Iguape-Peruíbe, these MIDAs form a web of protection across one of Earth's most complex ecosystems.

Serving millions for health and well-being

Yet the story of the Atlantic Forest is also about people. Surrounding major cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the forests filter water, store carbon, regulate climate, and protect soils. For millions of urban residents, the Atlantic Forest is as essential as it is beautiful, binding ecology and society in a fragile balance.

Over 145 million Brazilians live within its biome, with 40 million inside the Biosphere Reserve itself. This complex MIDA provides essential services such as freshwater, food, energy, and cultural identity, which are supported through innovative measures such as Payments for Environmental Services (PES) to incentivise wise use and local stewardship.

The Mata Atlântica endures as a reminder of what has been lost but also what can be saved through MIDA status. As the world's largest biosphere reserve, it shows how conservation and human well-being can be woven together, offering both biodiversity protection and hope for a more sustainable future.