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ENERGY

Solar panels bring light to Amazon, the 'last frontier'

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ITUXI EXTRACTIVE RESERVE, BRAZIL:

In the darkest reaches of Brazil's Amazon, solar panels are bringing light — and could help save the rainforest.

Aurelio Souza is working to install solar panels in villages along the remote Purus and Ituxi rivers in the western Amazonas state.

"The Amazon is the last big frontier for electricity in the country," says the consultant for a joint programme of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Brazil's environmental agency ICMBio.

"You have at least two million people (in the Brazilian Amazon) without access to modern energy."

Bringing power to millions might not sound like an obvious way to preserve the world's greatest forest, already under constant pressure from loggers and farmers.

But consider what the solar panels are replacing.

In tiny communities of the Ituxi nature reserve, west of the city of Labrea, small scale farmers almost universally depend on noisy, smoky generators for light and refrigeration — and frequent trips to buy more fuel at higher than usual prices.

To keep fish they catch in the rivers fresh they also use large quantities of Styrofoam, another environmental menace.

"The reduction in the consumption of diesel cuts greenhouse gases and reduces the dependency of communities on fossil fuels," Souza said.

The project was launched in July in a neighbouring nature reserve, called Medio Purus, home to about 6,000 people who subsist on fishing and family farms. And without the din of generators drowning

out the deep silence of the forest night, life is already changing.

At the community school in the Cassiana community, part of Medio Purus, night classes taught by satellite link have already become a whole lot more rewarding now that the generator is no longer needed.

"We couldn't concentrate with the noise of the motor and a lot of our classes were cancelled because there wasn't enough fuel," said Francisca de Almeida, 30, who is in her second year of studies.