

# Villagers fight to conserve resources

## Communities in Brazil's Amazon region are adopting environmental standards, one forgotten village at a time.

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GURUPA, Brazil --

A boat ride along the upper Amazon River is replete with the telltale signs of a forest in crisis: the drone of wood-cutting machines, the flatbed trucks piled high with logs, cow pastures where trees once grew.

But when one reaches Gurupá, a riverfront municipality of 25,000 people about 2,200 miles northwest of Rio de Janeiro, the landscape becomes suddenly green. Skinny palms stretch out of tree clusters, and vines tangle so thickly that not a drop of daylight leaks through.

Gurupá is one of a small but increasing number of poor Amazonian communities -- a couple of hundred, perhaps -- that have taken it upon themselves to fight the loggers, soy farmers and cattle ranchers who destroy their livelihoods and force them to migrate to urban slums.

Its people have spent the past seven years designing and voting on "use plans" that govern how much of each local resource can be extracted and when.

### TRAINING PROVIDED

Environmental technicians from the Netherlands-based Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation trained members in sustainable logging, based on the principle that the harvest should be no more than what grows naturally in a 30-year cycle. And they have found ways to diversify their income sources -- selling managed shrimp, hearts of palm and exotic forest oils -- to reduce timber dependence.

One neighborhood, Rio Marajoi, is in the process of being certified by the German-based Forest Stewardship Council to manage the berry acai, a staple of the Amazonian diet that American health-food stores tout as a superfruit.

While deforestation in neighboring counties has increased drastically since the 1980s, because of the incursion of logging companies and the growth of cattle ranching, satellite images show that Gurupá's forest cover has increased. Today, less than 1 percent of Gurupá is deforested and no logging companies are operating there, said Bira Pantoja, a local activist.

In a region that Brazil's National Institute for Space Research says loses an area the size of New Jersey each year to deforestation, that makes Gurupá a pioneer in conservation, said Geronimo Trecanni, a director of the Pará state institute responsible for regulating public land.

### MUNICIPAL POLICIES

"In Gurupá, land reform and sustainable resource use are municipal policies," said Paulo Oliveira, a director of IBAMA, Brazil's national environmental protection agency. "I know of nowhere else that has done that."

"Our great-grandparents lived off this forest. We have to make sure that it is still here for our children and for our children's children," said Manoel Joao Gama dos Santos, 63, a community leader in one of the many stilt-house neighborhoods that dot the riverside.

But their future is not assured.

These communities have demanded that the Brazilian government survey their lands and document their right to live on it. The surveys can thwart what is known as *grilagem*, whereby loggers and ranchers fabricate property deeds and force people off territories they have inhabited for generations, Trecanni said.

Seventy percent of the Amazon, which constitutes half of Brazil's territory, still has not been surveyed by the government, Oliveira said. "We say the Amazon is like a house with five stories, because five different people claim to own the same parcel of land," he said.

Government officials and environmental groups such as Greenpeace are keeping a close watch on communities such as Gurupá.

"While these communities won't stop the entire deforestation of the Amazon, their contribution is fundamental," said Marcelo Marquesini, a Brazil-based coordinator for Greenpeace's Amazon campaign. "These are people that know their rights. They have learned how to profit off the land responsibly, so they won't just sell it unknowingly for pennies. . . . They are the watchdogs for their own lands, doing the work that the government does not have the resources, manpower and perhaps the political will to do."

Gurupá's success did not come easily.

Ten years ago, the same families that today sell acai to California-based health-drink company Sambazon, a proponent of fair-labor and environmental standards, had deforested their lands so extensively that they didn't have enough acai to eat. "We would just go into the forest and cut everything in sight," dos Santos said. "Resource management is what got us on our feet again."

With the 1978 arrival of an Italian priest, the Rev. Giulio Luppi, liberation theology -- the Catholic doctrine that preaches social action on behalf of the poor -- took root. People began to protest the semi-feudal system of land ownership in which four rich landowners, formerly rubber barons, controlled all the territory in the 3,300-square-mile municipality.

The protests culminated in 1986, when workers held a 54-day sit-in to wrest the local union from the landlords' control. As the rubber industry collapsed and the traditional powers left over the next decade, new threats appeared in the shape of loggers. *Grilagem* was rampant.

In 1997, the community began to work with the Educational and Social Assistance Federation, a Brazilian social-service organization. They lobbied the state and national governments to create protected areas that would give neighborhoods exclusive rights to use local resources sustainably. The resulting 2002 settlement was the first of its kind in the region, Trecanni said. Three other settlements others would follow in the coming years.

## **POVERTY PERSISTS**

Despite the gains, the municipality is still incredibly poor, with the average family earning the minimum wage of \$175 a month. The rural areas lack electricity or running water, schools go up to only the seventh grade, and healthcare is almost nonexistent.

"Today when a logger tries to steal or buy land here, we call the national environmental agency, the unions, the attorney general's office; we know how to get them out now," said Pantoja, a native of Gurupá who coordinates local campaigns for the federation. "In terms of quality of life, we still have a long way to go."