44. How to make a sustainable living in a tropical forest: the case of Suruí Indians in the Amazon rainforest – success under threat

Claude Henry

The community of Suruí Indians have benefited – until now – from a 1988 revision of the Brazilian Constitution that recognized the rights of Indians on their original lands, including the right to exclude intruders. However, the way, from complete isolation – despite former US President Theodore Roosevelt trekking the region in 1914, where he almost died from an infectious disease – to this recognition, has been long and paved with horrendous episodes. Isolation ceased with the construction in the 1960s of the first road through the Amazon rainforest, the Trans-Amazonian Highway. The first contacts between the Suruí and the outside world have been devastating: transmissible diseases, against which they were defenseless, and bloody confrontations with would-be settlers, lured from all over Brazil by fraudulent property titles on Amazonian land, decimated the community, from 3000 to a few hundred members. Under similar circumstances, many Indian communities were wiped out. With characteristic energy and under an exceptionally visionary leadership, the Suruí bounced back. When in 1988 their exclusive rights on their lands were confirmed, they proved able to make a living from them in the following sustainable ways:

- Harvesting timber and non-timber products according to exacting rules. They refrain from prematurely felling trees commanding high prices like the Brazil nut tree, which grows perfectly straight up to 60 meters. Their tenure security made the Suruí confident enough to devise and implement a 50-year plan for harvesting and regenerating the forest, reforesting those parts of their lands that, during the extremely difficult pre-1988 period, had been devastated by illegal logging and criminal fires.
- Sharing the cost of storing carbon with the outside world. The Suruí started to reforest on their own, but that effort could not go very far without financial resources from the outside. Chief Almir Suruí – who manages to

combine a deep attachment to the ancestral knowledge and traditions of his community, with a university education (in biology) and a keen interest in advanced technologies, and who is highly regarded by both the members of his community and many partners in Brazil and abroad – considers it legitimate to seek contributions from outside the Suruí community. The whole world is indeed benefiting from the conservation and regeneration of the Amazon rainforest. Seen from the sky, the Suruí lands appear as a green oasis surrounded by parched and ocher earth, which itself was once forest. The bulk of Suruí lands are in the state of Rondônia that, before the August 2019 fires, had already lost half its forest cover. Having been granted verified access to the markets for carbon offsets, the Suruí community agreed in September 2013 an initial transaction amounting to 120 000 tons of carbon offsets bought by the Brazilian company Natura Cosméticos, which is Latin America's largest cosmetic company and which aims at complete carbon neutrality. Other transactions followed.

- Protecting the forest against further degradation. Illegal logging, criminal forest fires and mining encroachments are ongoing threats that are essential to detect and repress as quickly as possible, before damage becomes too great. Detection is the task of the Suruí themselves; they use advanced positioning systems under a specific application of Google Earth Outreach, which Chief Almir likes to demonstrate himself to visitors. With Google Earth on his smartphone, he would zoom on the Suruí lands and check for anomalies. That day he spotted in a remote location the campsite of *garimpeiros*, illegal and sometimes aggressive gold prospectors. In this way, as soon as suspicious activities are detected, federal or state police agents can be sent exactly to the right place.

Criminal activities have always been a lingering threat. There is even a contract on Chief Almir's head. The threat has been taken seriously not only by the Suruí themselves but also, at least until recently, by the federal authorities, which assigned bodyguards from the police special forces. Nobody has forgotten the assassination on his doorstep, in the neighboring state of Acre, of Chico Mendes, the legendary defender of the forest and of the poor. And everybody knows how frequently environmental activists are murdered in the Amazon.

However, do federal and state authorities still bother? Police increasingly tend to ignore calls for help. Authorities keep denying evidence. For instance, echoing denials at federal level, retired police colonel Rocha, governor of the state of Rondônia, declared: "If we look at the situation in other countries, their forests are burning much more than in Brazil. You go to London or other countries, and what do you see? Smoke from burning, from industry. How can they demand of us what they haven't done themselves?" (Phillips, 2019). Despite this curious assessment, the firefighters based in Rondônia's capital

Porto Velho – a small band of dedicated albeit ill-equipped men and women – have in desperation attended dozens of fires a day for more than three weeks in August 2019.

Since January 1, 2019, when Jair Bolsonaro became president of Brazil, criminals have developed a sense of impunity. President Bolsonaro sees the conservation of the Amazon rainforest as a hindrance to development – that is, agrobusiness, logging and mining industries – and sees Indian indigenous people as *Untermenschen* (inferior people) who, as he once said, “smell, are undereducated and don’t speak our language” (Watson, 2018). He has already transferred key decisions concerning the forest and its inhabitants to the Ministry of Agriculture, controlled by the agrobusiness lobby. He thinks the Holocaust can be forgiven, as he said at a meeting with evangelical leaders on April 13, 2019. He thus might also think that he would be forgiven for transposing into the Amazon rainforest Hitler’s *Endlösung der Judenfrage* (Final Solution to the Jewish Question). Those who right now destroy the forest and confront the Indian communities are just anticipating systematic annihilation.

Can’t the Brazilian people understand that everybody would miss the Suruí entrepreneurship? When you enter their forest, coming from the parched land around, you almost immediately switch from a dry to a humid atmosphere; the neighboring farms and ranches would not survive the permanent drought that would result from the disappearance of the Suruí and their forest. With the disappearance of a significant proportion of the Amazon rainforest, drought would extend to the whole of Brazil, depriving water from, in particular, the 19 million inhabitants of the São Paulo conurbation. And, last but not least, the whole world would lose an essential carbon sink and biodiversity reservoir. The Suruí are not only innovators in sustainability, they are also canaries in a mine approaching explosion.

REFERENCES

- Phillips, T. (2019), “Chaos, chaos, chaos: a journey through Bolsonaro’s Amazon inferno”, *The Guardian*, September 9.
- Watson, F. (2018), “Bolsonara’s election is catastrophic news for Brazil’s indigenous tribes”, *The Guardian*, October 31.