

XAVANTE OPPOSE HIDROVIA ARAGUAIA-TOCANTINS

Laura R. Graham¹

Xavante Indians of central Brazil are vigorously mounting opposition to government plans to promote industrial shipping on waterways that border two of their largest reserves. The Rio das Mortes river, which forms the border of the Xavante reserves Areões and Pimentel Barbosa (see maps), is a principle artery of the Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia project. A total of 310 kilometers of the Rio das Mortes's left bank is indigenous territory. The 329,000 hectare Pimentel Barbosa Reserve extends for 150 kilometers along the Rio das Mortes and is the largest continuous stretch of intact cerrado (savannah) in Latin America. The 285,000 hectare Areões Reserve extends another 160 kilometers along the river. The multi-million dollar project would devastate the environment Xavante depend on for their livelihood and would exacerbate unjust social and economic conditions in the area. For the Xavante of these reserves, the hidrovia is the biggest threat they have encountered since their historic fight for lands in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It poses a grave threat to their way of life.

The Tocantins-Araguaia Hidrovia is one of several large-scale waterway projects planned by the Brazilian government (others include the Paraguay-Paraná, Tapajós-Telles Pires, Madeira-Amazonas). The project, also known as the "Central-Northern Multimodal Transport Corridor," would transform the most extensive river basin of central Brazil and the eastern Amazon (one of Brazil's four most important river basins)

¹Laura R. Graham is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iowa. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the Xavante of Pimentel Barbosa since 1981 and is author of *Performing Dreams: Discourses of immortality among the Xavante of central Brazil*. University of Texas Press, 1995. She is also project coordinator of Cultural Survival's Special Project, the Xavante Education Fund.

Acknowledgments: I thank Glen Switke of the Brazil office of International Rivers Network for providing me with current information to write this article. I am grateful to Frans Leeuwenberg for keeping me posted as to developments in Pimentel Barbosa and about the Xavante's opposition to the Hidrovia.

into a commercial waterway. The hidrovia is designed to support barge convoys transporting principally soy products to ports in Europe where it will be used primarily as feedstock for pigs and chickens.

The project's primary beneficiaries would be agribusiness corporations and shipping and construction companies whose businesses would be publicly subsidized by the project. In fact, the hidrovia would represent a considerable public subsidy to the expansion of soy monocultures throughout the cerrado (savannah) and transition rainforests of the Amazon. Other beneficiaries are European consumers whose costs would be reduced. Indigenous peoples and others who depend on the river's flora and fauna for their livelihoods are the human populations who stand to suffer the most from the project. In addition to the Xavante, six other indigenous groups would be affected. These are the Apinajé, Javaé, Karajá, Krahô, Krikati and Tapirapé. In all, the hidrovia would directly affect the lives of more than 10,000 indigenous peoples.

Xavante leaders from the Association of Pimentel Barbosa village denounce the project and are campaigning to stop it (see box insert). They oppose the project because of the environmental destruction and social disruption it will bring to their communities and to the region. The waterway threatens to destroy the life of the Rio das Mortes and disrupt life in their communities. The project would cause irreparable environmental damage to the river system, pollute its waters, alter wetlands and destroy food sources, such as fish, turtle eggs, and marsh deer that Xavante rely on. The increased water traffic and influx of people that would inevitably accompany the project would mean more illegal trespassing onto Xavante lands, increased exposure to prostitution, alcoholism, disease (especially sexually transmitted diseases [see box Xavante Education Fund]) and exacerbate social tensions in the area.

Xavante are especially concerned about agricultural toxins that would be transported on the river. They point out that the transportation needs the hidrovia is designed to serve could be easily addressed by paving existing roads in the area. They

advocate completion of the BR-158 highway which, prior to four electoral campaigns, has been partially completed and soon thereafter abandoned. Xavante demand exploration of transportation alternatives, including the Ferronorte and North-South railroads, for which no serious study has been made.

Extent and Potential Environmental Impacts of the Tocantins-Araguaia Hidrovia

Preliminary environmental impact studies prepared by the Tocantins-Araguaia Hidrovia Administration (AHITAR, an independent organ of the Ministry of Transportation) indicate that project works are planned along more than 2,719 kilometers of the Araguaia, Tocantins, and Rio das Mortes river systems. The project, whose initial phase is estimated at \$220 million, entails extensive engineering work including dredging, rechanneling using stationary and moveable dikes to straighten river courses, and blasting of rock outcroppings. In the Rio das Mortes part of the project, 1.2 million cubic meters would be dredged and 72,390 cubic meters of rock outcroppings would be dredged or blasted away in order to guarantee a minimum year-round draft of 1.5 meters. The works would open 580 kilometers of the Rio das Mortes for barge convoys between Nova Xavantina, Mato Grosso and São Feliz do Araguaia, Pará (see map 2). Currently this sandy-bottom river is unnavigable during the dry season.

Large-scale engineering works would also be carried out on the Araguaia River to guarantee a year-round minimum draft of 1.5 meters. This would entail extensive dredging and rock blasting. New ports would be located at ten towns along the river.

Eventually construction of navigation locks at Tucuruí Dam would extend the hidrovia to the port city of Belém in the Brazilian state of Pará. Plans include construction of four large dams along the course of the hidrovia, which would require the construction of navigation locks, and linking the hidrovia with the Carajás Railroad and the North-South railroad (although only 109 km. have been completed after ten years of construction).

In total, the project would alter 2,719 kilometers of the Tocantins-Araguaia-Rio das Mortes river system. Its channels would require permanent maintenance. Four dams would be constructed for the Tocantins-Araguaia Hidrovia and an additional seven large dams are planned for the basin. The dams would obstruct the upstream migration of most Amazon fish species, which require upstream waters and lagoons for their annual reproduction. Deepening and broadening the channel would change the hydrology of the river system, accelerating river flow. This could lead to a greater incidence of catastrophic flooding that would affect towns and cities along the riverbank during the rainy season. The removal of rock outcroppings may lead to the draining of biologically important wetlands ecosystems along the river course, including the "Pantanal" of the Rio das Mortes and Ilha do Bananal.

The Rio das Mortes Pantanal, an area of approximately 500,000 hectares between the Rio das Mortes and Araguaia rivers, was designated for conservation and ecological study by the Mato Grosso state government in 1994. Owing to its location as a transition zone between two biomes, the cerrado and Amazon rainforests, specialists consider the area to have an exceptional degree of biological diversity, especially in plant and tree communities and aquatic birds and mammals. Very few studies have been carried out on the flora and fauna of the area. The 2,000,000 hectare Ilha do Bananal is the largest fluvial island in the world. On it are located the Araguaia National Park and Karajá indigenous reserves. The Ilha is home to several endangered species including maned wolf, giant anteater, marsh deer (largest of the neotropical deer species), tapir, blue macaw, and Amazon turtle. The hidrovia would cause significant damage to both the Pantanal of the Rio das Mortes and the Ilha do Bananal resulting in a loss of significant biodiversity.

The accelerated river flow would cause constant disturbances or elimination of micro-nutrients of the river bottoms and lagoons which would directly impact fish reproduction and benthic species. This could mean a decrease in the variety and number

of fish, dolphins and other aquatic species, including the giant otter, gray and pink river dolphin, spotted jaguar and marsh deer.

Increased barge traffic along the waterways would lead to water pollution and erosion of riverbanks. It would also increase the risk of accidents, possibly involving agricultural chemicals and fuel. The project would also have an impact on tourism in the area which is considered to be a paradise for ecotourism and fishing. The tourist industry potentially stands to lose millions in lost tourist revenues.

Impact assessments conducted to date fail to account for the environmental and social costs that the project would entail. Cost-benefit calculations fail to contemplate impacts on biodiversity, natural ecosystems, fisheries, or indigenous peoples. Neither do the studies consider the project's negative impacts on more sustainable alternatives such as ecotourism and extraction of native plant products. Instead, the project has been justified on the basis of initial works designed to open the navigation channel and on estimates of potential cargo demands (including grains, beef, lumber, soy and other agricultural products, chemical fertilizers, agrotoxics). Evaluations fail to consider the range of potential transportation options available for these products (for example, railroads, roads, other hidrovias, storage during the low-water season). They also fail to address the potential social and economic value of alternative land uses to soy plantations which, in the cerrado, require intensive inputs of agrotoxics and chemical fertilizers and are rapidly displacing small farmers.

Additionally, studies to date fail to incorporate the long-term costs of channel maintenance. Experience on the Mississippi, Danube, and Rhine rivers, which are presented as the "model" for the Tocantins-Araguaia Hidrovia, demonstrate that maintenance costs exceed initial costs of opening channels. Moreover, these systems indicate that larger-scale engineering works will probably be needed in the future as the river responds to changes caused by deepening, widening and straightening curves. The ongoing costs to stabilize the Mississippi and the Rhine, which do not have sandy soils

with a high risk of erosion as do the rivers the Tocantins-Araguaia Basin, are extremely high. Now it is widely recognized that the long-term environmental impacts of these "hidrovias" have reached unacceptably costly levels and plans are underway to restore the wetlands that these projects have drained over decades.

Indigenous Opposition to the Hidrovia

The Tocantins-Araguaia Hidrovia proposal dates from the 1980's when, as part of the Integrated Development Project for the Tocantins-Araguaia Basin (PRODIAT), the Brazilian government and the Organization of American States (OAS) advanced the idea of implementing an industrial waterway. The Cardoso government included the hidrovia in its first "Brazil in Action" list of priority infrastructure projects. \$120 million of the initially budgeted \$220 million would come from public funds and the government is reportedly negotiating \$100 million in financing from the Japanese Export-Import Bank. With Brazil's financial crisis, however, it is uncertain where funds for the project will be secured.

In June 1995, the Docks Company of the state of Pará and AHITAR officially requested authorization to begin construction of the Hidrovia from IBAMA (the Brazilian Institute for Environment). In December, 1995 AHITAR and the Foundation for Research Support and Development (FADESP) produced a Preliminary Environmental Impact Study. This assessment was publicly proven to be grossly inadequate at a hearing in the Congressional Environment Committee in November, 1996. The same parties that produced the first study are conducting a follow-up study. This is expected to be made public in early 1999.

Xavante opposition to the project dates to an historic meeting held in October, 1996 that brought together representatives from all villages in the Pimentel Barbosa and Areões reserves. At this meeting Xavante leaders produced the "Cachoeira Declaration" which they directed to Brazil's President Cardoso. The declaration states:

If this Hidrovia is constructed, it will be the end of our animals and it will cause serious damage to the environment, destroying the fish, an important part of the diet of our people. It will do away with the place where many animals live, such as the dolphin, giant river otter, jacaré, tortoise, turtle, and others.

The company's boats will dig holes and dynamite large rocks in the river. Boats will always throw garbage and oil and poisons into the river without any real controls. The river, and also the lakes in our territory, will be seriously impacted. In the lakes there are many fish that we eat. We know that the boats will bring toxic chemicals when they return. This threatens our river and our lakes.

We don't want any work to be carried out on the Rio das Mortes. We don't want the signs, we don't want the buoys, we don't want dynamite, we don't want the river to be damaged, the lakes, the fish, the turtles. We don't want the poisons, we don't want the hidrovia.

In June 1997, through legal action advanced by lawyers at the Brazilian NGO Instituto Socioambiental in Brasília, the Xavante succeeded in obtaining a federal court order prohibiting work on the hidrovia. Lack of an environmental impact statement and the failure to meet constitutional requirements for projects affecting indigenous peoples, including "consultation" and obtaining a special Congressional authorizing act, were cited as reasons for the injunction. Since then, federal officials from the Ministry of Transport and FUNAI (National Indian Foundation) have attempted in vain to coax Xavante leaders to accept compensation, including fishculture and agricultural projects, and "millions of dollars."

Subsequent to their victory in the courts, representatives of one village unsuccessfully attempted to attack a soy barge that passed the Pimentel Barbosa reserve, in spite of the construction embargo on the river. Shortly thereafter, members of another Xavante village boarded a barge in the illegal port of Agua Boa and sacked the vessel. Xavante from Pimentel Barbosa are using small boats supplied by the World Wildlife Fund, which has a wildlife management project in the area, to patrol the stretch of river bordering their reserve.

Karajá indigenous leaders have also opposed the hidrovia. In December, 1997, they wrote an open letter to voice their position on the hidrovia. They state, "We don't produce soy or raise cattle to transport on the barges. This project is not for our benefit, and instead it will hurt us. There is no point in providing us with compensation, because in the supermarkets we will not find turtles, fish, and other wild animals."

At a recent meeting of the Council of Indigenous Missionaries (CIMI) in Brasília, regional representatives who work with the Karajá, Xerente, and Tapirapé peoples discussed the possibility of bringing together representatives of indigenous groups from throughout the region who would be affected by the hidrovia. Such a meeting would open up the possibility for a broad based expression of indigenous opposition.

Now that Brazil's presidential elections have taken place (on 4 October), Xavante plan to send a delegation to Brasília. In the nation's capital they intend to make their concerns public to government representatives and to members of the national and international press. They have printed T-shirts to disseminate their opposition message and to raise funds to support their cause. Brazil's President Cardoso appears to be sensitive to public interest on the Hidrovia. Letters may be addressed to him at:

Palacio Planalto

Brasília, DF

[Amy, can you get this address. Glen is looking for it in Brazil]

Originals, or copies of any correspondence to Cardoso, may also be addressed to [Amy, is there someone in the CS office who could advise as to who else should be copied]. For more information about the campaign to stop the Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia contact International Rivers Network, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94703-1576. Tel 510-848-1155, Fax 510-848-1008. <http://www.irn.org>.

Sources

Folha da Terra

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BOX INSERT:

Xavante Declaration On The Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia, August 1998.

Our life depends on the river, as do the lives of six other indigenous ethnic groups including the Karajá, Xerente, Apinajé, as well as the lives of many whites. We, the Xavante, are not against progress or development, but these must take place without risking the life of the river. Why not pave the BR-058 highway, which would be much less expensive and would solve transportation problems?

A sandy river does not support large-scale navigation which causes erosion of the riverbanks and damage to the environment. Dredging disturbs and kills the food sources of fish, turtles, catfish, and many other animals that live in or depend on the river.

The Hidrovia will benefit a very small number of people. The poorest will continue to be poor. We want the paving of 300 kilometers of the BR-058 to be completed. Many ranchers, truck drivers and citizens of the region want this too. If this is done the Hidrovia would not be necessary. Many whites will be unemployed with the Hidrovia. If the BR-058 does not function, agrottoxics will be transported on the riversSAFE? WITHOUT DANGER?? There are no serious studies of transportation alternatives for this area.

We need the life of the river for ourselves, our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. We have to respect the forces and the production of Nature. And you? Won't you also need the river for your children, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren? It's not enough to simply wear this t-shirt! You must also heed its message!!

Maps

1. Brazil. From, Graham, Laura R. Discourses of Immortality among the Xavante of Central Brazil. University of Texas Press, 1995. Reproduced with Permission of University of Texas Press. [Amy I am writing to request permission].
2. Map 2. Area of Xavante Reserves. From, Graham, Laura R. Discourses of Immortality among the Xavante of Central Brazil. University of Texas Press, 1995. Reproduced with Permission of University of Texas Press. [Amy I am writing to request permission].

Photos

Amy -- Monti is to send you photos of a meeting of Xavante in Pimentel Barbosa.

Here are caps & credits for the slides included here (which I would like returned to me):

87.7-5, Xavante canoeing on the Rio das Mortes. c. Laura R. Graham, 1987.

91.79, Xavante man canoeing on the Rio das Mortes. c. Laura R. Graham, 1991.

87.7-55, Xavante men paddling a skiff on the Rio das Mortes. c. Laura R. Graham, 1987.

91.164, Xavante man fishing from the bank of the Rio das Mortes. c. Laura R. Graham,
1987.

91.80 Xavante man collecting turtle eggs from the banks of the Rio das Mortes. c.
Laura R. Graham, 1991.

IRN-1. Cacique Supto Xavante addressing representatives of all communities in the Pimentel Barbosa at the August 1998 meeting in which the Xavante Declaration on the Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia was formulated. c. Glen Switkes/IRN 1998.

IRN-2 Xavante elder speaking out against the hidrovia project at the August 1998 meeting that brought together representatives from all communities in the Pimentel Barbosa Reserve [or the August 1998 meeting in which the Xavante Declaration on the Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia was formulated. c. Glen Switkes/IRN 1998.

IRN-3 Xavante elder speaking out against the hidrovia project at the August 1998 meeting that brought together representatives from all communities in the Pimentel Barbosa Reserve [or the August 1998 meeting in which the Xavante Declaration on the Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia was formulated. c. Glen Switkes/IRN 1998.

IRN-4 Xavante man speaking out against the hidrovia project at the August 1998 meeting that brought together representatives from all communities in the Pimentel Barbosa Reserve [or the August 1998 meeting in which the Xavante Declaration on the Hidrovia Tocantins-Araguaia was formulated. c. Glen Switkes/IRN 1998.

IRN-5 The threatened Rio das Mortes that borders the two largest Xavante reserves. c. Glen Switkes/IRN 1998.