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Where Back to Nature Is Wave of the Future

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Special to The New York Times

XAPURI, Brazil — Valerio da Silva slit an ancient tree trunk with his knife and quickly hooked a cup into the bark to catch the white latex oozing out.

"A man who makes poor cuts gets a terrible name," he said. "To damage a tree is as bad as killing a pregnant animal or not paying your debts."

The rubber tappers who once helped advance the Industrial Revolution of more than a century ago are still collecting latex deep inside the Amazon rain forest. There is no longer much demand for their natural rubber, but environmentalists see these forest people as bearers of a message ever more pressing in a world where nature is widely abused.

As the race for development and quick profits consumes vast swaths of Amazon forest, forestry experts and economists argue that the estimated 300,000 people who live off collecting wild rubber, nuts, resin and other forest produce have demonstrated that exploiting yet preserving the rain forest can go hand in hand and even be profitable.

The killing last December of Francisco Mendes, leader of the tappers, at first had seemed to fracture their movement and its battle against land

speculators and cattle ranchers. But now, three months later, the tappers seem even more determined to gain reserves for extraction only. Their opponents, the landowners, have used more anonymous death threats to intimidate them.

"How can we stop now," Maria da Silva said, scurrying about the small family farm in the heart of the forest and hanging some deer meat to dry in the sun. If it wasn't for Francisco Mendes, she added, "all this forest would have been destroyed."

A union meeting was coming up and Mr. Mendes's brother, José, and other tappers were visiting the Silvas in their forest clearing, a three-hour walk from the mud road to Xapuri (pronounced shah-poo-REE).

Unlike the tappers farther west who continued laboring under the old system — like serfs forever in debt to landowners for taxes and goods — these were independent people working a forest that their parents or grandparents had divided up. They now defended these lands on the basis of the squatter rights recognized by Brazilian law.

More Battles Ahead

Soon the conversation turned to battles still awaiting their movement. With their great knowledge of the terrain and the advantage of surprise, they seem to operate more like an unarmed guerrilla movement than a peasant union.

Pedro Rocha, one of the visitors, was recalling the fight for the reserve of Santa Fe that began one day as the tappers saw workers measuring the land on behalf of a man who claimed to be its owner.

"They were getting ready to cut," said Mr. Rocha, "so we had to mobilize fast. Five of us left at sunset. We went through the whole forest to warn everyone."

The next morning, he said, "we were 64 men, seven women and a lot of children and we stood in front of the men with the chain saws and we talked with them." The forest dwellers were arrested. But months later, after a court battle, Santa Fe was declared an extractive reserve.

Of the 45 or so blockades, Mr. Rocha thought, the movement had



Valerio da Silva, a rubber tapper, collecting latex from a rubber tree in São Luis do Remanso, a forest region near Xapuri, Brazil, with the help of his wife,

Maria. Environmentalists say the industrial world could learn something from the rubber tappers, who exploit resources without damaging the rain forest.



São Luis do Remanso was declared a reserve last June.

managed to stop the chain saws and the bulldozers about 15 times.

Other nearby lands, now stripped and sprinkled with cattle, represented battles lost. An estimated 10,000 tapper families have been driven off the land into the towns since 1970 when large companies and private speculators first moved into this part of the western Amazon.

Even the majestic growth around the Silva farm had come close to being destroyed when a company claiming ownership threatened to sell it and break it up into farming plots. But this land, known as São Luis do Remanso, was declared a reserve last June, after long pressure on the Government from Mr. Mendes.

Free Water and Medicine

Valerio da Silva now works his own four trails that wind past the wild rubber trees — more than 1,000 of them — naturally scattered amid dozens of other species. He collects the latex, smokes it and lets it coagulate into blocks. Sometimes he works at night with a kerosene light, like a miner's lamp stuck on his head. The

lamp, he says, helps to scare off most animals, except snakes.

Adults and children seem to have the ease of shoppers in a supermarket as they move around the jungle. "Have a drink," José Mendes said as he climbed on some fallen trees and reached for a vine overhead. He slashed it and let the water pour out. The nasty sting of an ant was soon soothed with a piece of bark.

Valerio da Silva pointed to leaves that could numb a toothache and a tree whose resin could seal a skin wound or an ulcer. Most families, the tappers said, collected wild honey and had access to soursop, cashew, banana and jackfruit trees. Men hunted, women grew beans, corn and manioc. Moreover, they explained, from January to March, rubber tappers collect Brazil nuts, which account for almost half of their income.

'It Rains Death Threats'

Stephan Schwartzman, an American environmentalist who has made extensive studies of rubber tappers' lives, has said that with a visible in-

come of close to \$1,000 per year, supplemented by planting and hunting, tappers often earn almost twice the minimum salary on which many paid workers in Brazil must survive.

The government of Acre State has now conceded four "extractive reserves" to the tappers. Both the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, whose road projects have caused forest destruction in this region, are now looking at ways to promote more reserves and form cooperatives to commercialize forest produce.

"It is the best alternative for the fragile soil in the Amazon," said Raphael Negrete, a bank official. "It beats disastrous cattle and colonization schemes."

Amid such support, the rubber tappers of the Xapuri region are thankful but wary. "We have some very powerful enemies," said Mr. Rocha. "The ranchers want empty land. We want more forest reserves. It still rains death threats in Xapuri."