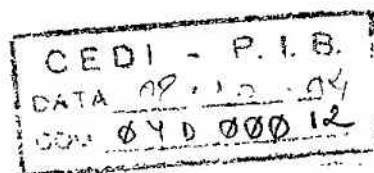




On the banks of the Rio Juruá in Eirunepé, Ery Montecorado, once-prosperous owner of a rubber

holding, waits for barges carrying supplies. The town is now swollen with refugees from the forest.

By Michael Parfit



Whose hands will shape the future of the Amazon's green mansions?

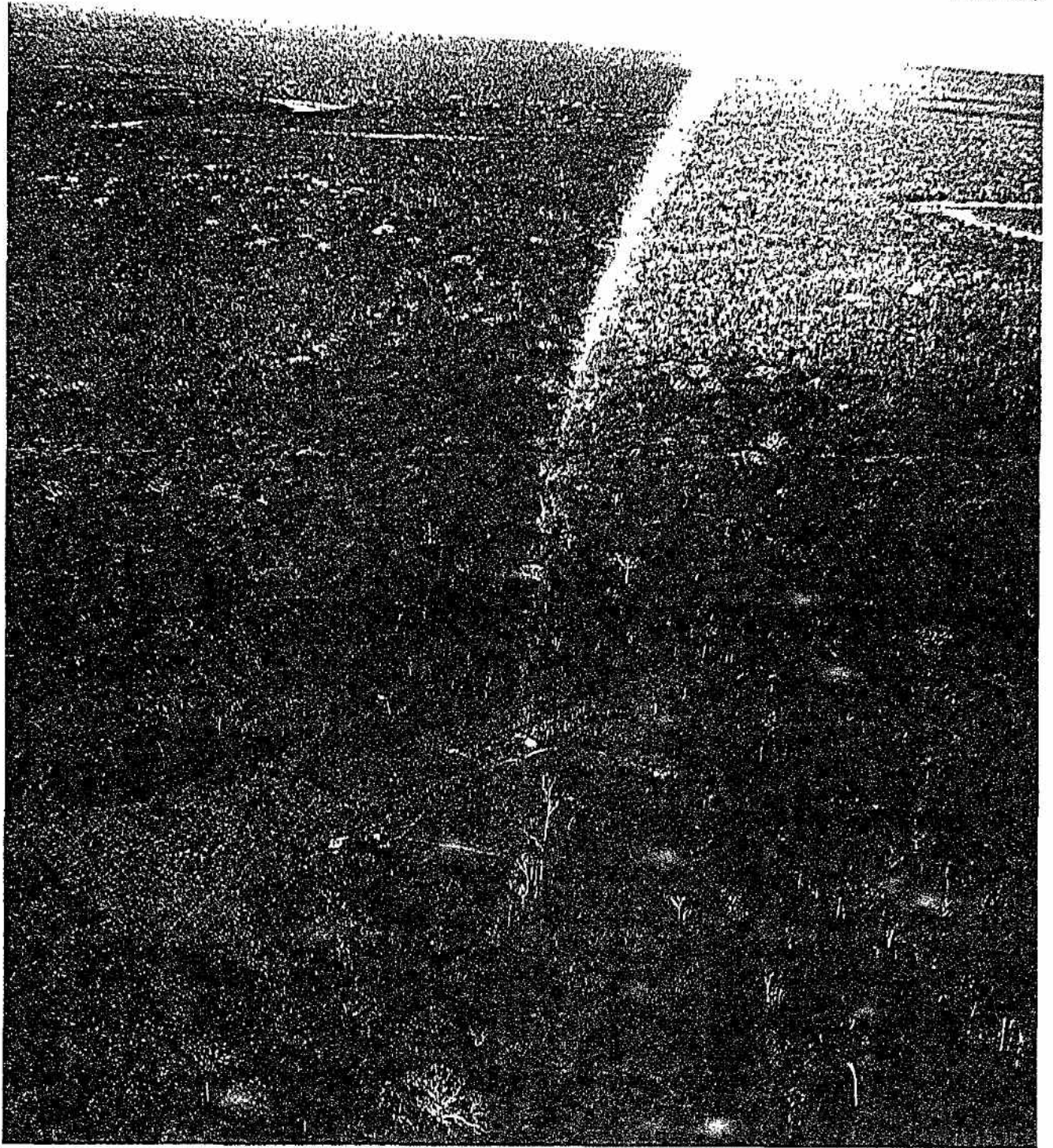
Rubber tappers were once regarded as saviors of the Brazilian rain forest, but now the seringueiros are hard put to save themselves

In the hot, dry days of summer in the rain forest, when the Rio Juruá shrivels and the forest sweats, when the vultures circle over the town of Eirunepé waiting for the fish to die, and smoke blows up from the fires to the south and stains the air with rumors of the murder of Chico Mendes, Ery Montecorado stands restlessly at the window of the Montecorado brothers' store and thinks he has been forgotten by the world.

The river is the highway here; there is no other road

to Eirunepé. Montecorado watches it every day. Maybe today it will end his isolation. Surely today his cousin Amazonino, the Governor, will come again to give away chain saws, and bring news that the government is at last going to pay the Montecorado brothers for their land. Surely today the barge from Manaus will arrive, bringing the supplies of *cachaça* (Brazilian white rum) and flour that will restore prosperity to the Montecorado family, and let them compete again with the Bald One. Surely today a canoe will come down from the fading village of Mourão, deep in the forest up the Rio Eru, to tell him that the people of the forest have ceased their exodus and have gone back to their trees, and that the empire of rubber is not finished after all.

"If you turn your back to the light you'll see only your shadow," a Portuguese sign says in Montecon-



Beneath a rainbow's arch, seringueiros have built a few huts and made a small clearing in the forest.

They tread lightly on the land, but they must live in isolation without schools, stores or doctors.

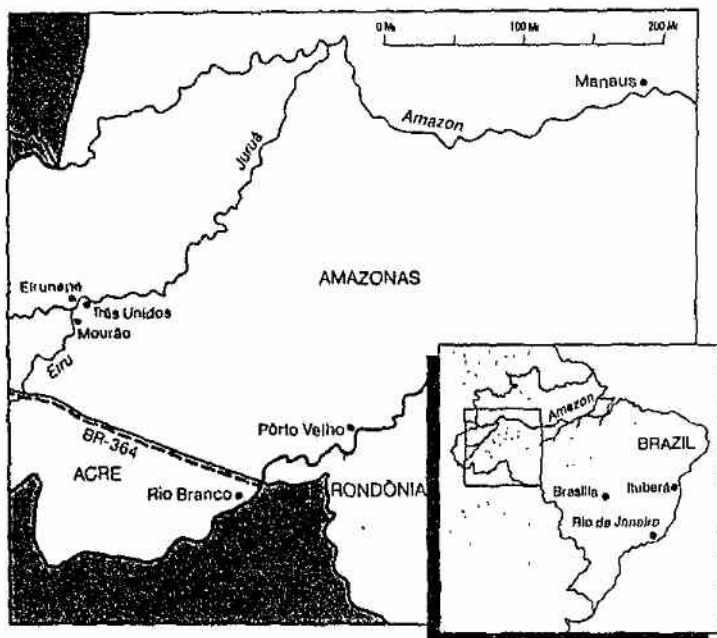
Photographs by Randall Hyman

rado's office. All over his walls and ceilings are plastered the handwritten signs that contain the compiled wisdom of his life, such as "Love isn't to be understood; it is to be lived." The signs are frayed; he hasn't put up a new one for years. He stands among his weather-beaten thoughts at the window, wearing a blue shirt, a gold chain, a crucifix and an expression of anxious goodwill. Surely today the approaching river, whose annual floods have already consumed five blocks of Eirunepé, right up to his door, will change its course and stop gnawing at his foundations. He stands embraced by solitude and plans a retaining wall.

But Monteconrado is not alone. If you pulled the camera back from the window where he stands watching the river, far back to the edges of the great basin of the Amazon, you'd see the silhouettes of millions of people from the world's wealthiest nations standing there, watching him as anxiously as he watches the river.

His solitude is illusion. The vast green landscape of his home is the center of a huge preoccupation. To us out here in the developed world, the forest has suddenly become immeasurably valuable and its residents its custodians. Surely the people of this last great tropical forest on Earth will protect the trees for us, and with them the planet itself—the planet that we, for all our power and wealth, have heedlessly brought to the brink of the flood.

"The Amazon is the magic mountain of ecology,"



Author left Rio Branco, flew over BR-364 to reach the remote rain forest town of Eirunepé, where the Rio Eiru and Rio Juruá flow together and seringueiros struggle to survive. Green is Amazon basin in Brazil.

said an American official in Brasília, whom I visited during a recent two-month flight by light aircraft around Brazil. "It all happens there." In the western Amazon, 1,500 miles away, an anthropologist who has worked there for ten years put all this hope in a few words: "It is the people who live from the forest who will save the forest."

These sentiments are widespread. During the past couple of years much of the worldwide concern about the environmental changes that seem to be accumulating around the planet has focused on the Amazon basin. This huge expanse—2.8 million square miles, an area nearly the size of Australia—has been described as the lungs of Earth, as the storehouse of genetic diversity and, because of its magnificent abundance of life, as the hiding place of cures for AIDS and cancer. Not only is it a myth that the forest tames the greenhouse effect as a net consumer of large amounts of carbon dioxide (the amount of CO₂ released by the burning and decomposing of vegetation exceeds what the forest takes up), but forest destruction, particularly by burning, has actually contributed to global warming. When, in the past few years, large-scale clearing and burning of the forest for farms and cattle ranches—encouraged by government incentives—clogged the Amazon's skies with smoke so thick that aircraft were grounded, and scientists suggested that the fires added to the greenhouse, the watchers began to crowd around.

The Amazon has become a vivid symbol of the interdependence of nation upon nation for the survival of life on the planet. And, oddly, out of violence and martyrdom, and perhaps because of a human longing for saviors, some of the poorest, most powerless people on Earth—the men and women who gather latex from trees in the Amazon wilderness, and the Indians who live among them—have been assigned leadership in the task of protecting it.

"Truth is like a rose; it has thorns"

In July of this year I stood in Monteconrado's office, chided by his signs—"Whoever recognizes his ignorance begins to be wise." "Truth is like a rose; it has thorns"—and found myself immersed in this strange situation, struggling to understand it.

I had flown slowly down from the United States in my Cessna Cardinal, across thousands of miles of forest. Although long stretches of forest passed below without a sign of roads or fires, there was no escaping the question of the Amazon's development. Near the northernmost tip of Brazil, at Boa Vista, some of the gold miners who are pouring into the region by the thousands, polluting the water with mercury, and killing Indians with disease and bullets, crowded around my plane as I refueled, hinting that it might be worth



"Chico Vive" spelled out in Brazil nuts honors Mendes at mass six months after his murder. In first *empate* (protest action) after Mendes' death, 50 rubber tappers burned loggers' huts to stop further cutting and protect livelihood.



my while to sell it on the spot for double its value in gold dust. Escaping their grasp and my temptation, I flew past an area where a huge hydroelectric dam has flooded more than 700 square miles of jungle, poisoned the water with rotting vegetation and destroyed a river's economy downstream. At Pôrto Velho, in the state of Rondônia, whose forest has borne the brunt of the past decade's onslaught of ranchers and settlers, a young man urged me to attend the state's first ecological conference. "People have been saying we have been burning and killing," he said. "This is all not true."

As I flew west from Pôrto Velho I saw long fingers of pale green and brown reaching into the forest, where chain saws, bulldozers and fire have pushed pastureland north into the woods like mange. Then, when I landed at the western frontier city of Rio Branco, in the state of Acre, a stranger at the airport slipped a mimeographed note into my hand. There would be a mass that evening, the note said, to commemorate the six-month anniversary of the murder of Chico Mendes.

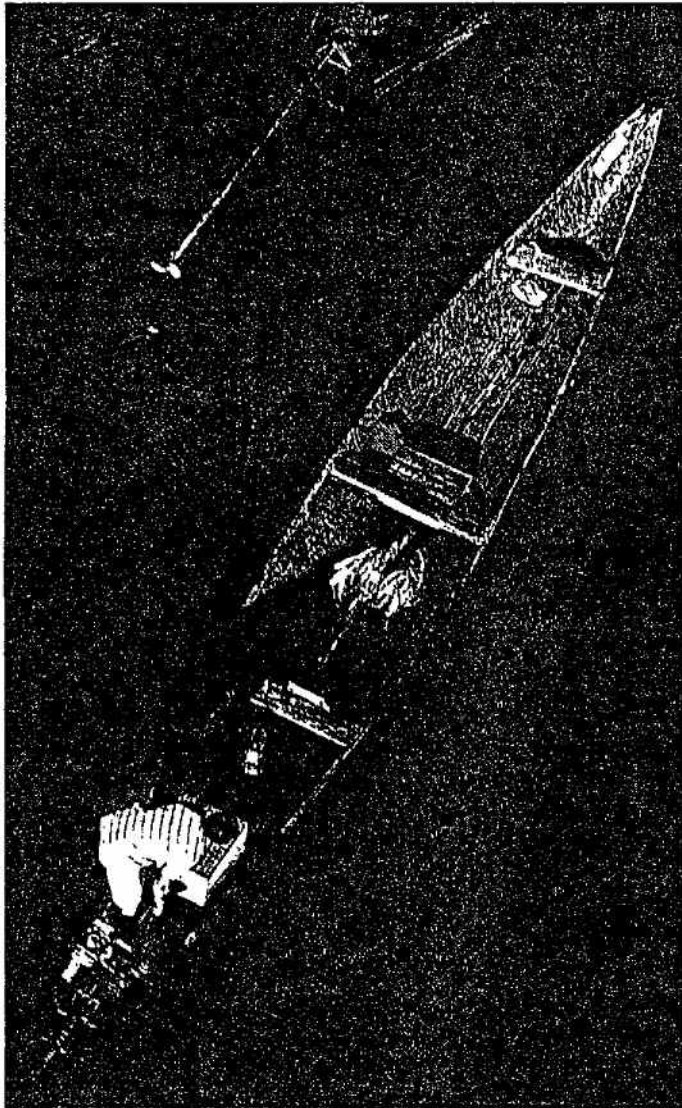
That night the Rio Branco cathedral was crowded. On white paper in the aisle two words were spelled out

Author Michael Pöfit flew the same Cessna Cardinal to Brazil that he used to crisscross this country for his book Chasing the Glory.

in Brazil nuts: "Chico Vive." It was indeed a celebrated murder. Francisco (Chico) Alves Mendes Filho was a rubber tapper, a *seringueiro*, one of anywhere between 70,000 and 300,000 people—depending on who's estimating—all over the Amazon who harvest latex from wild rubber trees. During the past ten years he had first led the organization of the *seringueiros* of southern Acre to oppose practices of debt peonage imposed by large landowners. Then, when Brazilian land-development policies, and roads financed in part by international banks, led to widespread cutting and burning of forests that the *seringueiros* used, he and others developed an effective system of nonviolent protest, called *empates*, in which crowds of *seringueiros* would suddenly show up where men were clearing the forest and persuade them to stop.

The idea that the Amazon forests already contained a system of economics, and a resident population that was committed to its survival, was so appealing to the environmental community of the developed nations that Mendes was invited to the United States to testify before Congress and international banks. He was establishing a worldwide reputation as both a labor organizer and an environmentalist when, on December 22, 1988, he stepped out of his house and was shot down. Mendes and his *seringueiros* had peacefully confronted several ranchers and one of them, Darli Alves da Silva,

Who can save Brazil's rain forest?



Pickup truck of the Amazon, the motorized dugout canoe is a main means of travel through the forest.

and his two sons have been convicted of the murder; they are appealing the verdict.

"We are remembering a person who gave his body and his gift for us," the priest said of Chico Mendes six months after his death, and the crowd of 500 stood and sang: "It is the time of grace! It is the time of liberation!" The shirt and sandals Mendes had been wearing when he was killed, and the towel that had been draped over his shoulders, were brought to the altar. On a mimeographed handout with the hymns were Mendes' words: "I want to live to defend the Amazon." Through his death Chico Mendes' defense of the forest became famous. All the aggression of developers against the forest, all the fears we have of losing this green abundance, were focused by the death of one man. Chico Mendes had become the martyr of the Amazon.

By the time I reached Rio Branco, nine movie companies had made offers for the rights to Mendes' life story, journalists from leading publications and television networks all over the developed world had made pilgrimages to Acre to interview Mendes' colleagues and survivors.

So to get a clearer view of what is happening in the Amazon I flew northwest, following the infamous highway BR-364 to where it trickled out into a cart track. The road looked like an arrow through the heart of the jungle; Brazil plans to push it through to Peru, opening Pacific ports for Amazon trade. I turned away from it, flew north over unbroken forest for an hour and landed at one of the most isolated towns in the Amazon, Ery Monteconrado's home: Eirunepé, in the state of Amazonas.

Going to the forest people in a jungle town

It was like going behind enemy lines. Rio Branco is a city of the road, a part of the familiar, bustling network of Western commerce, connected to the pulse of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Eirunepé was a jungle town, part of the ancient web of water and woods. Here, in the dusty little clearing of Eirunepé, and in the intact forest that rolls away for hundreds of miles in any direction you look, I would learn whether the people of the forest really had the power to accomplish what we desire.

There was no bread in Eirunepé. People ate turtle, fish, manioc and, when they could afford it, rice and beans. Once I spent the equivalent of my waiter's weekly salary (about \$12) and bought a pizza, but I never could buy bread. Ery Monteconrado said it was because the barge from Manaus hadn't come yet. Lino, who Monteconrado's brother thought was a Communist drug dealer, said bakers of Eirunepé had stopped baking because the government let the price



Children of former rubber tappers play in the poor section of Eirunepé. The prospects for work there are

limited, but as one administrator says, "No one likes to see their children dying slowly in the forest."

of flour rise but the price of bread had not increased.

Lino, who used only his first name, couldn't post his thoughts on his wall; they were too complex. Maybe that's why the Monteconrados didn't approve of him. Maybe it was that he looked like a hippie, with his frizzy long hair and his delighted eyes, or that he represented radical Catholic theology in his work with Indians in Eirunepé.

Outside Lino's house, where we often talked in the warm evenings, the air was laden with the smell of rubber from the processing plant up the road; it was acrid but nostalgic, like a good childhood dish made of fruit and burned sugar. As we stood in the moody stink of the town's economic base, Lino remarked obliquely about the perspective of flight.

"From the jungle," he said, "we hear a plane and we can't see it; from a plane, you look down and you can't see the people. Neh?"

The people of the jungle hide beneath their magnificent canopy; it is easy, flying over, to imagine there is no one there. But the Amazon is a rich environment for human beings as well as for trees; it has been thoroughly populated for millennia. As many as 4.8 million Indians may have lived there before Europeans brought murderous diseases and conflict in the 17th century; when they thinned out, the *seringueiros* came. They poured into the Amazon in two waves, first during the great rubber boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and then again in World War II when refugees from Brazil's poverty-stricken northeast became Soldiers of Rubber, marched into the forest

for the sake of the Allies' tires and never came out.

Soon after I reached Eirunepé I went looking for the *seringueiros* up the Rio Eiru in a boat powered by a one-cylinder engine as loud as a machine gun. There I began to learn that the people of the forest are leaving it.

The river, less than 50 yards wide, was as twisted as a snake in a small box. We pushed upstream, turning with it, and the sun swung back and forth overhead as if all our global disturbances had finally made the planet lurch off its track. The forest crowded the banks, as awirl and alive as the river. The clean trunks of trees climbed to high, solitary crowns, and explosions of vines smothered others. A crocodile snoozed on a sandbank, white butterflies haunting its eyes. Snags wiggled in the current, as if someone were signaling urgently from below. At the outside of each bend was a fresh cliff of red dirt or a tumbled mass of new-fallen trees, while at the inside of the bend the new silt left by the moving river was already growing shrubs. The river was an agent of deforestation; it cut through the woods like a bulldozer, trimming the long-haired landscape and making room for new life.

All the way, at intervals of a mile or more, we passed houses on the banks, tiny shacks on stilts made of palm, trees split and flattened, and thatched with leaves. The homesteads were stark: a few banana trees, young manioc plants and scrawny corn, chickens, pigs and old dugout canoes on stilts, filled with earth to grow herbs. Each home was 20 feet above us up the bank, but the high-water marks on the walls were higher than the stilts; for part of each year the people of the



A seringueiro's wife and her grandchildren wait out rain in their flimsy split-palm hut near the Rio Eiru.

forest are inundated by the Amazon's annual floods.

At each home the windows were full of solemn children. We waved; they seldom waved back. They watched our boat come bellowing up the river; they watched us go bellowing away. They were like owls, with their big dark eyes and their heads that turned but did not acknowledge us. Then we reached Mourão and I began to understand the affliction that lay along the river like a fog.

It was the sadness of ending. Mourão was a *seringal*, owned by Ery Montecorado and his brothers. A *seringal* is a rubber holding, land claimed by a *seringalista*, who is like a feudal lord: a rubber baron. He allows seringueiros to live and harvest rubber on his land. The seringueiro pays him rent, sells him rubber and buys supplies from him. The system is often abused and seringueiros have been held in debt slavery, arranged so that the rubber sold never pays off the cost of supplies. That was the system that Chico Mendes fought successfully in Acre, but nobody was fighting it here. No one needed to; it was falling apart.

Once the village of Mourão, at the heart of the Montecorados *seringal*, had more than a thousand residents. Now 19 families lived there—just over a hundred people. Six years before, there were 12 soccer teams here, provided with uniforms by the Montecorados. Now the few children left played beside weatherbeaten rows of houses, with bits of bark stuffed in a plastic bag.

Mourão's hotel was falling down. The village still

had a discotheque, with a circular floor polished by years of barefoot dancers. That night I heard music and thought I'd find life there at last. But inside, in the curiously blue light of a single candle, only two young girls and two pairs of children shuffled slowly around in clumsy embrace to the music of a cassette recorder. It was the first sign of affection I had seen in the forest, but it was forlorn, like the embrace of survivors in a town decimated by war.

Human signatures in the forest

The forest crowded around Mourão. From the bright heat of morning in the village's clearing it looked impenetrably dark. But inside it was cool and full of shimmering green light. Cicadas whined; birds whistled. I walked there with a young seringueiro named Francisco Sergio Pinheiro, who was 22 and had three children. The trees he visited had been used for a generation or more. Their bark was scarred in even, parallel lines. No one had cut initials, but this human signature in the forest was deep; it was like seeing footsteps worn in the stone stairs of a cathedral, or a methodical record of days cut into prison walls.

With a knife bent like a can opener Sergio sliced a thin, swift gash at a slant in the bark of each tree. The white latex dripped out as fast and as rich as blood, and ran down into a cup.

"Right now I am a seringueiro," Sergio said shyly. "I would like to be something else."

The driver of my boat was with us in the forest. He was a brash man with a loud voice, probably induced by deafness. When I asked Sergio how he got his *estrada*, his trail of trees, the driver answered for him, shouting through the calm: "The *patrão* [boss] gave it to him. When he doesn't want to cut anymore, he gives it back to the *patrão*. He can have another *estrada* if he wants it. There are many *estradas* now without seringueiros. They don't have the people to cut them."

Why?

"The seringueiros left a few years ago," the driver said cryptically. "They couldn't get supplies." But other people were not so reticent. "The life of a seringueiro," a former seringueiro told me once, "is the most suffocating life you can have. He fights and fights and fights and has nothing. His hands are full of smoke."

Cutting rubber has never been good for anyone except the *patrões*. Even in the days of the rubber boom seringueiros fought disease, Indians and crocodiles for months at a time and then ended up in debt. It remains a desperate existence. You go out on the *estrada* long before dawn, your bare feet shuffling among leaves and snakes, your way lighted by a smudge of light from a kerosene headlamp called a *paronga*. All day you cut trees and gather latex while

bugs pierce you and gather blood. Then you come home and must smoke or press the latex; you have made \$3. If you work hard you can cut 1,100 pounds of rubber during the dry season and earn about 23 cents a pound. In the wet season, in some parts of the Amazon, you can harvest Brazil nuts for several hundred dollars more, or cut down occasional trees for sawmills.

"A seringueiro has no future," said a former tapper whom I had met selling trinkets on a street corner in Rio Branco. "He only works to make others rich." The hard work is not the only trouble. A seringueiro lives deep in the forest with little social life, no schools and no medical help for miles. "In town there are people to help you," one seringueiro told me. "On the seringal you can only get help from God."

Seringueiros are as meek and as strong as their forest, and almost as quiet. "They know everything about the jungle," Ery Monteconrado's brother Ecy told me once, "but they don't know how to tell you about it." They didn't know how to tell me about their pain, either. On another day on the Rio Juruá I had talked to a woman whose family moved from Acre 16 years before. Both her husband and son were seringueiros.

"It was very bad in Acre," she had said simply. "We thought it would be better here."

Was it?

"It is more or less the same," she had shrugged. "It's just hard to live."

A man who once administered Brazil's rubber programs put it more vividly: "No one," he said, "likes to see their children dying slowly in the forest."

Before getting back in the thunderous boat to leave

Mourão, I walked among the houses. From near the disco came the solitary high voice of a child singing while she swung her baby sister in a hammock. "But now you have left me, my love," she sang, over and over. A young fisherman, getting ready to shoot dinner with bow and arrow in a nearby oxbow lake, used a word I would soon hear again: "This is a weird place," he said. "It is *acabado*."

The word does not translate directly into English. Roughly, it means finished, complete, worn out, over.

"We call it the exodus," said Raimundo Chagas da Silva, a representative of an Amazon-wide organization of seringalistas. I was back in Eirunepé, where there was still no bread. The sun blazed behind him through the open door of his house into the dim kitchen; all I could see of him was the flash of a white smile in a long dark face, and the flicker of his long supple fingers. Flies crawled on the lip of his coffee cup. A black-and-white cat limped past outside. Inside, the sun shone along the polished top of a hundred-year-old cabinet made of Eirunepé mahogany.

Chagas was a seringalista. He claimed 10,000 hectares upriver, but now he owned a hotel and a small sawmill and, like the Monteconrado brothers, wanted to sell his land to the government.

"The seringals," he said in a slow, golden voice, "are places of abandonment."

As if he were speaking a hymn, he rolled the reasons out into the warm evening. There was more to the exodus than just a hard life; seringueiros had been putting up with that for a century. But now the price of rubber was too low, the cost of living too high, and

Susan Purvis



Eirunepé's vice mayor, José Alcimar Garcia, does his best to provide assistance and reassurances to



refugees like the little girl above, but resources are meager. "We must have agriculture," he says.

the hard life of cutting rubber was not justified by the return. "And so the negative result has arrived," he said. "The people decide: if they must suffer they might as well suffer in the city." The smile flashed, the slow voice rolled. "Now it is acabado. It walks swiftly toward the end."

Brazil, which Chagas called the mother country of rubber, has long tried to support its seringueiros, not just to protect their industry, but to keep them out there in the Amazon occupying the borderlands. But rubber is grown so efficiently in plantations in Southeast Asia that it makes wild rubber uncompetitive. So the government taxes imports to support an artificially high price for its own product. Despite that, the price has lagged behind the country's wild inflation. Also, perhaps because the government has recently put more and more emphasis on other ways of developing the Amazon, support for the seringueiros' way of life has also faded. Gone is a regular radio program that



Holding a collecting cup in his mouth, a rubber tapper cuts groove to bleed a few ounces of latex from tree.

gave them the up-to-date price figures and an inspirational drama called *Machete, Paronga and Courage*. Gone is a system in which the government attempted to provide food at lower prices. Gone are boats that carried doctors and dentists deep into the forest. Gone is an ambitious program designed to give seringueiros minifactories, which enabled them to process their own rubber and keep more of the profit.

A new administrator, whom I visited in Brasília, promised that many of those programs will return, and that the price will be pumped back up. In Acre, with the help of outside groups and fierce encouragement from U.S. environmentalists, the organization Chico Mendes led has been able to develop a few schools in the forest and revive some of the minifactories. But there's another fundamental obstacle to the resurrection of rubber in the forest: Brazil's rubber industry is turning to plantations.

Attempts to grow rubber in rows in the Amazon have usually failed because a leaf blight that is impotent among isolated trees runs through crowds of them like fire. But the blight needs humidity and heat, and now the rubber industry is planting its trees in drier, cooler areas of Brazil.

At one point during my flights around the country I spent a day at a Michelin Tire Corporation plantation in Iuberá (p. 60), on the coast between Rio de Janeiro and the mouth of the Amazon. It was winter there and the leaves had fallen; beautiful gray forests of rubber trees covered 5,500 hectares of rolling hills. A million and a half trees stood in rows there, each with its own little plastic cup and its custodial rubber tapper, who wasn't even a seringueiro; he was called a *sangradore*—a bleeder. Michelin employed 850 bleeders and 700 support people to produce about 3,000 tons of rubber a year; in the forest that much rubber would require the work of 6,000 seringueiros. Michelin gave each *sangradore* about \$75 a month and a free home with running water and electricity; there was a 20-bed hospital and a social life that centered on 19 villages. Life was better there than it was in the forest or in Eirunepé.

Forest rubber proves inferior

After seeing all this, I still had one hope for the jungle: surely its rubber had something special about it—an uncommon resilience, a wild toughness—that would always make it in demand. But that, too, was an illusion. Rubber cut in the forest is often contaminated by both debris and time, and comes out dirty and weak compared with bright, golden, plantation rubber.

New rubber plantations are approaching maturity. Last year 43 percent of Brazilian rubber production was from plantations; by 1991 it will rise to 60 percent. In Brasília I asked the nation's administrator of rubber

if, as more plantations begin to produce efficient, clean rubber, there will be less demand for the wild latex.

"It is inevitable," he said.

The stink of rubber in the air of Eirunepé seemed more nostalgic than ever one afternoon when I walked through the streets with the vice mayor. His name was José Alcimar Garcia. "There will soon be bread," he promised. We walked down a long, elevated plank walkway into an area called Vila Cacau, where tiny houses with glassless windows stood on stilts in row after row. These were the new homes of the seringueiros.

Promises to the poor in Eirunepé

Alcimar offered reassurances to all the people we passed. Things would get better. He signed a requisition form so a destitute mother could buy food. "Go to the Bald One," he told her. He showed me the afflicted with a strange pride: an old blind woman who crawled to him across the floor, a mongoloid child, a horribly distended baby. Alcimar promised help. "You will be mayor next time!" the blind woman shouted.

"Five years ago this did not exist," he said, pointing to row after row of shacks. "Five years ago the population of Eirunepé was 8,000. Now we think it is 30,000." All those people had come out of the forest. A man led an ox past us. People wobbled by on bicycles. Little boys ran and grinned. Young girls in short, tight dresses slipped by, so childlike and sultry that they reminded me of what a physician had said earlier: families are so poor here that girls are sold into prostitution at the age of 11. Alcimar shook hands right and left, and squeezed the arms of the women. We stopped and talked to families. "I came from the seringal Foz de Taraucá," said one man, hoeing a meager garden. "I came from seringal Santa Maria," said a woman. The children in her doorway smiled and waved.

"I have found it better here," said a woman from the seringal Foz de Jupurá. "My husband works for the Bald One. We bought this house for [about \$60] and we're working to put in windows."

I asked Alcimar if he sees complete abandonment of the forest. He hesitated. Two women walked past carrying buckets of water on their heads. They smiled. He squeezed their arms. "Yes," he said. But even if prices and hardship wring every last seringueiro out of the woods, the forest will not be empty.

One day I walked into the house where Lino worked, into a room that opened out from a narrow hall like a chamber in a cave. Seven people looked up from work in notebooks on their desks. Red lines were painted high across their checks. They were Indians.

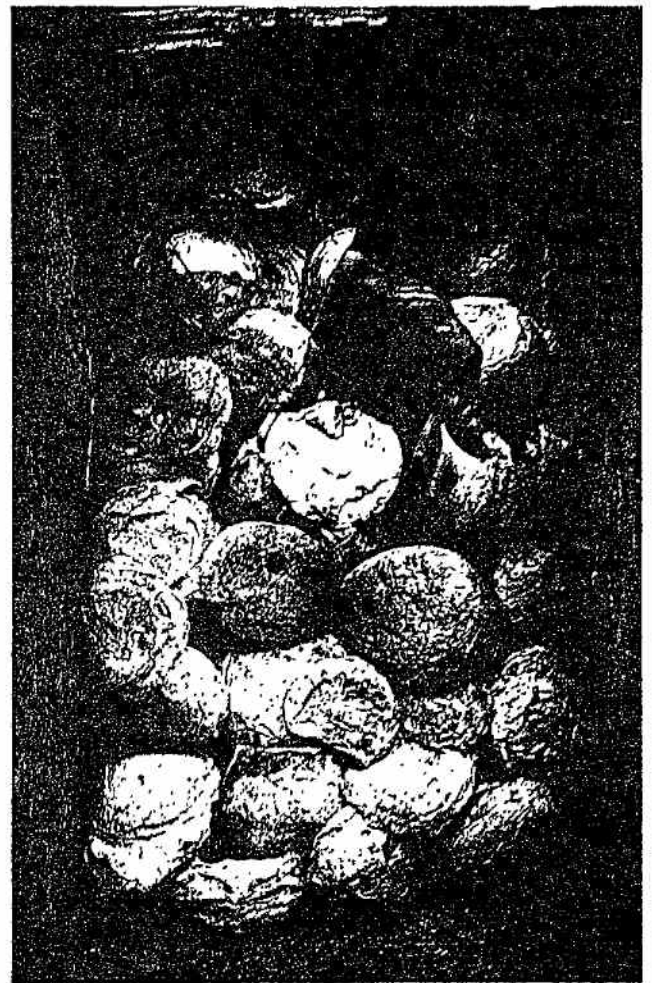
"The Indians and the seringueiros do not have the same trajectory, neh?" Lino said cheerfully. The Indians watched him. They were members of the

Kanamari tribe, which once had lived at Eirunepé but had moved deeper into the forest 130 years ago, when the Europeans came. The house was called Casa Kanamari. Lino was teaching them Portuguese.

"The seringueiros were dispersed through the forest," Lino continued. "Now they are truly leaving the forest for the cities. The Indians are not dispersed, neh? They are in social groups, and they tend to keep their social space away from the cities."

The nearest Kanamari village was Três Unidos, about 20 air miles—a day's travel by dugout canoe—east of Eirunepé. It was a group of 20 wood-and-split-palm houses built on stilts near a stream at the north end of the airstrip on which I landed. Três Unidos was ramshackle and dirty—recently acquired pigs had made the ground a black bog—but it was full of laughter. It was the opposite of Mourão; it thrived.

The Indians at Três Unidos did not cut rubber. They had little commerce with the outside world.



Coagulated latex "biscuits" collected in the forest are filled with impurities that decrease their value.



Tapper's house is on stilts to protect it during frequent flooding, when travel is only by canoe.

They lived on fish, game, wild fruit and small plantations of manioc, sweet potatoes and bananas. The men cleared new fields every couple of years and the women farmed them. This communal life is so effective that one state agency is trying to persuade seringueiros to get together in semicomunal groups and practice small-scale agriculture. "Like the Indians," a state field worker had said.

But people were trying to change the Indians, too. An international missionary group called New Tribes had built the airstrip, written down the language, translated parts of the Bible and provided medical care. The organization that Lino worked for, a Catholic missionary group, taught Portuguese to the Kanamari and took individuals like a young chief to meetings with other tribes to make them aware of the conflicts of the jungle, and to teach them how to claim their own part of the forest. The two missionary groups distrusted each other but cared enough about the Indians not to make open war.

Perhaps as a result, the young chief looked more preoccupied with life than others of his cheerful tribe: he had been converted by both sets of missionaries, and now gave evangelical religious services by the light of a paronga in the small wooden school building, then talked about learning Portuguese while preserving his culture. "We want to dance our own dances," he said. But others want to dance with them, because if rubber can't save the forest, maybe the Indians can.

"At the time that a species like rubber is rolling over the edge and is no longer valuable in an extractive context," says Thomas Lovejoy, the Smithsonian's As-

sistant Secretary for External Affairs, who has been conducting research in the Amazon for 23 years (SMITHSONIAN, April 1988), "there should be other resources that come on."

"Researchers," writes Philip Fearnside, a noted Amazon scientist, "are racing to find ways to make saving the forest economically advantageous." This includes study of Indians' use of medicinal plants, in the hope of finding new cures (SMITHSONIAN, February 1989), and other ways they use the forest.

One of the researchers is William Balée, who is studying three Indian tribes near Belém. I talked to him during my later flights around Brazil. He had found, among other things, a powerful black dye, but was just as interested in the way Indians moved through the forest over the centuries, using it fully but changing it gently, like a breeze or a river, and perhaps contributing to its diversity.

Balée was uncomfortable with turning Indian ways of life into commerce. "I could not recommend the encouragement of export from groups whose economies are completely unintegrated," he said. But what bothered him more was the demand (which covers our expectations of Indians and seringueiros alike) that the forest must pay its way in our world. "I don't think it needs to be justified by the fact that it can produce," he said. "Its continued existence is justification enough for its continued existence." That belief does not keep Balée and others from continuing their search. "Using ethical and moral arguments should not preclude using practical approaches," Tom Lovejoy says.

At Três Unidos I found one use that would make millions in America. It was a plant about ten feet high, with leaves like fingers. If you gave some of this plant to the person you loved, said a Kanamari named Da'um, the love would be returned.

A walk through the forest

Unfortunately, it turned out that the tree was more of a tradition than a drug, so was useless at home. But the forest led me on, as if it were a woman and had given me the tree. I walked through it with Da'um and his nephew, who was 8. Da'um strode swiftly among the trees, a shotgun over his shoulder, his broad feet treading silently on soft, wet ground. He left tracks like a bear's. The boy, confident and aware, ran after him, then came back down the trail to wait for me when I lagged behind. Birds whistled invisibly in the trees. A family of tawny monkeys leaped through the canopy. The boy watched, listened and never said a word. He waited for me by a log, then scampered ahead. He left tracks like a cub's.

"The life Indians lead in the jungle is just like an animal life," the seringalista who claimed Três Unidos



Kanamari Indian student writes instructor's name in Eirunepé school run by Catholic missionaries. Effort to teach Indians Portuguese is based on a belief it will help them protect rights and economic interests as development encroaches on their part of the rain forest.

had told me. He meant it as criticism. "It would be best if they became more integrated in society so they could contribute more."

But the forest is a sanctuary of not just biological diversity but human diversity as well. The Kanamari are neither poor nor rich; they simply live. What cures for the rest of us hide in that secret? If you turned the Kanamari to commerce it would vanish as swiftly as smoke. The boy's essence was freedom. Where would you put that boy in Vila Cacaú, and how would you calculate the loss? To me that sounded more violent than burning the trees. Indians may, however, contribute to the forest's survival without being consumed by commerce. As Lovejoy points out, "Learning how the forest can have economic uses is not synonymous with turning Indians themselves into capitalists."

And the Kanamari need pieces of our culture just as much as we may need bits of theirs. One day a baby fell out of a stilted house and broke his leg. The people came around: Could I fly him to the hospital? After delivering the child and his mother to Eirunepé I went to see Lino.

He was in the backyard of Casa Kanamari, washing clothes in a pan. At first we talked about one of the major achievements of the battle Chico Mendes fought: the general acceptance of the idea of extractive reserves, which are like parks with people in them. They are areas set aside in the forest for people like seringueiros to live in so they can harvest the jungle's renewable crop without fear of expulsion by him. Twelve extractive reserves are in place or planned, including 9,700 hectares of Monteconrado land at Mourão. One reserve covers more than 2 million hectares.

The proposed reserves sounded ambitious, but when the president of the agency in charge of developing them described them to me during another one of my hops from place to place in Brazil, they looked like a smokescreen. "Tell me," he said after the interview, "will your article help our negotiations with the World Bank?" Or were the reserves, like many other efforts to preserve pieces of the world, just a rearguard action used to ease fears and pave the way for destruction elsewhere—small victories in a general retreat?

Lino was wary of the reserves for another reason. He was worried that seringueiros and Indians would be lumped together in them. "That will annihilate the Indians," he said.

I repeated to him the words of hope I had brought with me to Eirunepé weeks before. They seemed like one of Monteconrado's wall thoughts to me now—battered and out of date. I said them anyway: "The people who live from the forest will save the forest."

Lino grinned cheerfully. "Saving the forest is not really just a matter of saving ethnic groups, neh?" he said. "It will be a matter of raising the consciousness of the world. If we don't change our relationship with the environment, we won't be able to save anything—the forest or anything else. We'll end up destroying ourselves and the viability of life." He grinned. "Neh?"

Then I went to a party and met the Bald One.

"Hey, you big fat turtle!" someone shouted through the clatter of bottles and laughter. At the end of a long table a huge man looked up. He pretended rage. He slapped the table. The bottles jumped. He rolled his vast eyes and massaged his left breast with huge fingers. He wore only bathing trunks. His enormous body



Eirunepé commercial baron Manuel (the Bald One) Carvalho (on right) throws a party at his ranch.



Vaquero lassos steer on Carvalho ranch, where land still shows ruins of forest cleared ten years before.

dripped. His naked scalp shone. He poured a cup of cachaça, spilled half of it on the table, drank it, dipped a piece of cashew fruit in salt, took a bite and threw the rest out onto the lawn. His voice was a deep gargle.

"I defend the forest!" he shouted. "I defend it! I only cut it when my cattle need grass."

His name was Manuel Gomes Carvalho, but people called him Manuel "Careca" (the Bald One). The party was at the Bald One's *fazenda*, five miles from Eirunepé. He'd hired the Eirunepé bus and a couple of dump trucks to haul half the population of town out the bumpy red road. On the lawn *quadrilha* dancers entertained the crowd. Behind the open buildings a row of young girls in tight dresses waited for another dump truck. More bottles of cachaça and Brahma beer came out of the cooler. There was bread on the table.

The Bald One had another drink. Rubber was the past in Eirunepé. He was the future.

The Bald One had the biggest ranch in the area, 2,300 head of cattle and a group of stores in Eirunepé that overflowed with merchandise. His barge had come in. He had come to Eirunepé 25 years before to export jaguar furs. When that was outlawed he turned to goods and cattle. Everything about him was audacious, from the expanse of his belly to the way his pastures pushed back the trees. From the air the ranch looked like a piece of Texas, with stock ponds and corrals.

On the ground his operation had the vigor of Texas, too. I had watched his *vaquero* wear out two horses and one shirt roping 50 head of steer for a buyer. I'd heard his foreman boast about the fecundity of his ranch hands. Pointing out an 18-year-old wife with 1-year-old twins, he said "Here we don't lose any time. All this work, and all these children, too."

Ranchers will destroy forest until stopped

It is not surprising that ranchers continue to destroy forest wherever they can in spite of evidence that many Amazon soils don't support grass for long. Brazil's ranchers carry the moral scythe of manifest destiny. Once that energy belonged to the Soldiers of Rubber and their patrões. Now the patrões live in dimly lit rooms among their thoughts of the past and wait for barges that don't come. The momentum is in cattle. In Brazil, where land-protection regulations and enforcement officers often fall off the truck between Brasília and the forest, momentum is more important than law. Recent studies have shown that rain forest is far more valuable intact than burned, but that doesn't matter to momentum. In the United States in 1875 it would also have been more logical economically to have kept the cows and the alfalfa in Connecticut, and ranched bison on the plains.

There was something familiar about the Bald One:

Who can save Brazil's rain forest?



Kanamari Indians, like this man from village of Três Unidos, know the uses and values of forest plants.

his confidence, his arrogance, his determination, his exuberance, his awareness of profit. In the clean, crisp, efficient office in which I found him a few days later, surrounded by filing cabinets and typewriters, where there was not a single piece of philosophy on the walls, he had turned into a businessman. The veneer of reasonableness was drawn across him the way a modest gray shirt was drawn across his belly. "I have 128,000 hectares," he said. "If I clear 2,000 or 8,000, it makes no difference." I recognized his priorities. He reminded me of home. Of all the people I had met there in the forest, he was the most American.

This was not encouraging. The last time I visited Monteconrado at his precarious window, I noticed a sign on the ceiling that didn't fit the dogged optimism of the rest. "Whoever increases his knowledge," it said, "increases his sadness."

Maybe that's the way I should have felt, leaving the forest with my new knowledge: our heroes the seringueiros aren't going to save the Amazon—they need help just to save themselves. The Indians can't set the forest's value with commerce—they'd disappear. And if we look honestly in the mirror we see the Bald One.

But there was a *fragem* in Três Unidos, a cold wind from the south. It felt as if the planet had changed its sweaty mood. It was refreshing, exciting, strong. There was reason for hope. The international banks have been reexamining their policies. Brazil has suspended some of the incentives that encouraged clearing of land for ranches. And this year there is a pause in the burning of the Amazon. The satellite count of fires is far lower than in the past. The smoke that closed airports last year is thinner. It is as if Brazil is waiting. For what?

"What sacrifices are Americans making in their daily lives to save the Amazon?" asked an environmentalist in Brasília. To Americans the fate of the planet is tied to the Amazon; to Brazilians the fate of the Amazon is tied to smokestacks in the North—the United States alone produces 20 percent of the world's carbon dioxide increase. Maybe Brazil is waiting to see if the powerful nations of the world will change the momentum and make the choice: whether the whole planet, extractive reserve that it is, is worth defending for its own sake or only until the cattle need the grass.

I left Erunepé. The cool breath of the *fragem* lifted the plane swiftly, and the grandeur and beauty of the Amazon stretched to an infinite horizon. It is no longer whole, but for the moment it's still there, like the rest of the planet Earth.

Sawmill worker stands atop logs awaiting shipment overseas, where demand drives Amazon development.