



Reservas Extrativistas e o papel do Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros em sua Implementação*

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There is a significant event which took place during the last decade in Brazil. During this decade, grass root organizations composed of workers living in forests started to propose policies of their own for environment conservation and to offer practical solutions to development in forest areas, based on the concept of control by local population with traditional skills in forest management: this is the concept of Extractive Reserves. In order that these proposals are put into practice in the future, however, it is now necessary that forest inhabitants have their own associations strengthened, and that they have granted the actual right of managing the forest areas which are decreed Extractive Reserves. This means channelling money and technology directly for grass-root organizations and NGOs controlled directly by forest workers, both at the local level and at the national level.

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To justify these propositions some background information is needed. The idea of Extractive Reserves was not proposed by researchers, government or environmentalist ngos in the first place, but by illiterate rubber tappers. From 1977 to 1985, while government policies were oriented by a misconceived idea of Amazonian as a future "granary of the world" reflected into subsidies to agricultural and ranching enterprises, rubber tappers, nut gatherers, riverine dwellers and other forest workers were starting to resist against the onset of cattle ranchers. They learned, led by such heroes as Wilson Pinheiro and Chico Mendes, the importance of direct action. They also learned the practical failure of traditional schemes of land reform based on the distribution of homesteads to individual farms, rapidly degraded and bought by land speculators and ranchers. Already in 1984 the rubber tappers were proposing, through some trade unions, the concept of 300-600 ha moduli of forest for extractive activity within the forest.

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The concept of Extractive Reserve was the alternative proposed in October 1985, at a meeting which for the first time gathered together forest workers from all Amazonia. This meeting produced in his final statement -- a report of conclusions reached by work teams composed by rubber tappers

and some staff to help in the summing up and writing -- a condemnation of previous development policies for Amazonia, and offered alternatives for land use, price policies, education and health, and other issues. The concept of Extractive Reserve was then printed for the first time. It involved simultaneously the recognition of rights to land by rubber tappers, and the demand that this land should be seen as forests and conserved as such. The land should not be fragmented into separate plots of land; instead, traditional systems of resource use should be preserved. Property should be made public, and use rights should be transferred to local communities for extractivist use. At the same meeting was founded the National Council of Rubber Tappers. This was neither a new trade union nor a federation of trade unions. It was conceived as a channel to convey the rubber tapper's voice to public opinion, politicians, government agencies, etc.; to get political, financial and technical support for constructive action inside the forests; to propose policies and to implement practical projects. Since then, with help from other ngo's the National Council of Rubber Tappers has established the concept of Extractive Reserve (having in this task the technical support of the Institute for Amazonian Studies) as public land granted by contracts to local population for extractive use, and managed not only to attract not only the interest of environmentalist organizations, but also to introduce the concept into the Land Reform agency (INCRA). At the same time, the Council was acting as an umbrella organization for meetings, trade unions and local development projects. An instance of this was the Projeto de Desenvolvimento Comunitário da Bacia do Rio Alto Juruá. In this area, where previously a local trade union struggled against traditional patrons without external support, the Council managed to pay special staff (Antônio Batista de Macêdo); obtained funds from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES); signed an agreement for technical cooperation with the State University of Campinas (São Paulo) which result in two expeditions by biologists and ecologists; obtained juridical support from Procuradoria Geral da República; and channelled small donations from several organizations; finally, the Council participated in work teams sponsored by IBAMA, the environmental agency, which led to a special law about Extractive Reserves and in particular to the first decreed Extractive Reserve in upper Juruá river, with half a million hectares of continuous forest. This act (dated from January 1990) was soon followed by decrees creating three other Extractive Reserves (all of them supported/proposed by the National Council of Rubber Tappers), totalling nearly 20,000 sq km. This means that, from 85 to 90, the rubber tappers have managed not only to make proposals, but also to effectively influence government policies.

The next decade will assist the testing of the rubber tapper's proposals. It should be said that the success of the Extractive Reserves depends on a set of conditions.

Immediately, there are three legal steps that must be done in relation with the already decreed Extractive Reserves: (a) the solution of conflicting claims to land ownership, through public action; (b) issue of contracts granting the territories to local communities through their associations; (c) elaboration of management plans. The first item needs stressing, because on the one hand land ownership in Extractive Reserves is not altered by the decrees; and because, on the other hands, the rubber tappers strongly object to the idea of buying these lands with donations for very good reasons. The second item is also essential, since the law does not assure that the Extractive Reserves will be, as proposed originally, handed down to local population with traditional skill of forest management. The third item means that forest management will be subject to control.

In the short term, Extractive Reserves should be areas in which the quality of living is improved by means of development plans which should include: (a) health plans; (b) educational program; (c) commercialization, transportation and communication systems (including cooperativism).

In the medium term, the Extractive Reserves should develop, on the basis of research, new sustainable activities, new technologies for balanced forest use and regeneration, and processing facilities. These steps, combined to training programs for rubber tappers, would in the near future not only increase the economic viability of the Extractive Reserves (not losing of sight, however, the non-economic returns of these areas), but also the capacity to direct management by local communities.

In order that such policies are really put into practice in the future, it is essential that resources and expertise are channelled not only to government agencies and to bureaucratic/technical personell linked to them, but also to the organizations composed of local communities and to projects managed by them. This means, in particular, strenghtening the National Council of Rubber Tappers as an institution; and also strengthening the ngs's which have given independent support to this association. This only will increase the probability that the concept of Extractive Reserves will not flounder into bureaucratic/administrative budget, political changes and institutional unstability.

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