
Brazil - Behind the Greenwashing: The commodification of forests and impacts on local communities in the state of Acre

The state of Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon region, earned worldwide attention in the late 1980s through the struggle for social and environmental justice waged by the late Chico Mendes. In more recent years, the state has once again gained prominence in Brazil and internationally, but for very different reasons. This time the spotlight on the state is a result of the propaganda around the “green” development model promoted through “forest governance” and based on the so-called “sustainable management” of the forests and the sale of environmental services. Today the state is portrayed as a “green” success story.

However, there are numerous facts and figures which demonstrate that the reality of the forest policy in Acre tells quite a different story, including: (1) the continuation of logging and other commercial exploitation activities; (2) the conversion of the “standing forest” degraded by selective logging of precious woods into a new source of profit that is also “sold” through “environmental services” mechanisms like REDD+; (3) the greater difficulties and growing restrictions faced by forest peoples, especially those who are fighting for freedom and autonomy in the conservation of the forests on which they depend for their continued survival.

We could begin by looking at some figures related to land ownership. Between 2003 and 2010, according to the federal government agency responsible for agrarian reform, INCRA, the share of land in Acre owned by smallholders fell from 27% to 17% of registered properties. In 2003, 19,200 families occupied 1.1 million hectares of land, and in 2010, 23,500 families occupied 1.388 million hectares. In the meantime, the concentration of land ownership rose sharply (1). In 2003, 444 large landholders controlled 2.8 million hectares of land, while in 2010, 583 landholders owned 6.2 million hectares, equivalent to 78.9% of all lands registered that year. A contributing factor to this growing concentration of land ownership was the regularization of the ownership of land illegally occupied by large landholders, through the “Terra Legal” (Legal Land) programme.

Other noteworthy figures refer to the promotion of logging activity in so-called direct use conservation units, primarily to produce timber for export, a business that has grown exponentially in Acre in recent years to reach almost one million cubic metres of timber in 2010 – a 400% increase since the implementation of “forest governance”. In the meantime, in other states in the Amazon region, logging has been reduced by half. Both logging and extensive cattle ranching, which has also undergone colossal expansion – from 800,000 head of cattle in 1998 to over three million head in 2010 – are activities proven to be destructive to forests (2). To make matters worse, among the government's plans is another project that will have major climate impacts: the exploitation of oil and gas.

Secondly, the expansion of so-called “sustainable” logging activity poses a direct threat to the survival of local populations. One example is the situation faced by the community of São Bernardo. In its forest-covered territory, the company Laminadas Triunfo is carrying out “sustainable forest management plans” on large landholdings known as Ranchão I and II. The legal grounds for the logging of rubber trees on these lands is an agreement that the local families had to sign in the Public

Ministry of the state of Acre, which supposedly establishes their approval of the company's "sustainable" management activities. At the same time, they are being pressured to leave the area. Some families have ended up moving away, but others refuse to go, because they know that life in the city offers no prospects for them; on the contrary, it would mean unemployment and poverty. The families who have held out and remain in the region where they have lived for many years report serious impacts, including the degradation of the streams that are the source of water in the region, the migration from the area of animals they have traditionally hunted, and the destruction of the forest and roads due to the continuous extraction of timber by Laminados Triunfo, a company that has nonetheless earned the FSC green label for its "sustainable management" of forests in other areas. While these families have traditionally had access to areas of up to 800 hectares of forest for rubber tapping and other activities, the company is offering them in exchange an area of barely 75 hectares per family in locations that are a long distance away and have been degraded by extensive cattle farming. These families are struggling to establish an autonomous extractive reserve that would allow them to conserve the forest while maintaining and strengthening their way of life, without depending on logging. The process for the creation of such a reserve has been slowly underway since 2005.

Another significant factor is a state government project currently being implemented, which is aimed at the sale of environmental services. Known as "Fogo Zero" (Zero Fire), the programme provides families with a monetary transfer of 100 reais (USD 60) a month, but in exchange, they must refrain from the traditional practice of setting carefully controlled fires to prepare the land for the planting of subsistence crops, which ensure their food security and are essential for their food sovereignty. This is a serious violation of these communities' right to food.

Moreover, it would appear that Fogo Zero is merely a trial run for the implementation of Law 2.308, adopted in 2010 by the Legislative Assembly of Acre, which established the State System of Incentives for Environmental Services. The services included range from carbon sequestration to so-called "sociobiodiversity". The law is based on the argument that the only way to ensure protection of the environment is by assigning it monetary value. But the real danger of this type of legislation is that the national market, and to an even greater extent the international market, will move in and take over control of the state's territory, with the backing of the state government, which is responsible for the entire system of regulation, registration, validation, measurement and monitoring of the supposed services provided, absorbing a significant share of the money generated. This is a detailed commodification of nature with a language and practices that are comprehensible only to a select group ("market-based" international environmental NGOs, consultants and corporations), but inaccessible to the general public, and especially the forest peoples.

To address these issues, a workshop called "Environmental Services, REDD and BNDES Green Funds: The Amazon's Salvation or a Green Capitalism Trap?" and a number of field visits were organized in Rio Branco, the capital of Acre, on October 3-7, 2011.

The workshop participants released an [open letter](#), signed by the numerous organizations they represent, in which they state: "The 'destroyers' would now be those who fight to defend nature. And so those who have historically ensured the preservation of nature are now viewed as predators, and are therefore criminalized. It comes as no surprise then that the state has recently become more open in its repression, persecution and even the expulsion of local populations from their territories."

"In Seringal São Bernardo, we were able to observe the priority placed on the interests of timber companies, to the detriment of the interests of local communities and nature conservation," the letter reports.

With regard to programmes like Fogo Zero, the workshop participants stress: “These populations may be allowed to remain on their land, but they are no longer able to use it in accordance with their ways of life. Their survival will no longer be guaranteed by subsistence farming – which has been transformed into a ‘threat’ to the earth’s climate stability – but rather by a ‘bolsa verde’ or ‘green allowance’, which in addition to being insufficient is paid in order to maintain the oil civilization.”

As for the new environmental services legislation mentioned above, they note that it generates “environmental assets” such as carbon market credits, adding: “Under this law, the beauty of nature, pollination by insects, regulation of rainfall, culture, spiritual values, traditional knowledge, water, plants and even popular imagery are converted into merchandise.”

“While making it possible to purchase the ‘right to pollute’, mechanisms like REDD strip ‘traditional’ communities (riverine, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities, rubber tappers, women coconut gatherers, etc.) of their autonomy in the management of their territories.”

The letter also condemns a carbon “offset” deal involving the state of California in the United States, which would purchase the carbon credits generated, and the states of Chiapas in Mexico and Acre in Brazil, which would provide the credits. The Amador Hernández region in Chiapas is already suffering serious impacts from a REDD+ project resulting from this “partnership” (see <http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/165/Mexico.html>), leading the workshop participants to declare: “Because we are fully aware of the risks posed by projects like these, we oppose the REDD agreement between California, Chiapas and Acre, which has already caused serious problems for indigenous and traditional communities such as those in the Amador Hernández region of Chiapas, Mexico.” In the meantime, communities in California continue to suffer the health impacts caused by the fact that polluting industries in California can continue to produce emissions by purchasing carbon credits from the project in Mexico and eventually from Acre.

The letter concludes: “Finally, we want to express here our support for the following demands: agrarian reform, official demarcation of indigenous lands, investments in agroecology and the solidarity economy, autonomous territorial management, health and education for all, and democratization of the media. In defence of the Amazon, of life, of the integrity of the peoples and their territories, and against REDD and the commodification of nature. Our struggle continues.”

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(1) More information is available

at <http://www.mst.org.br/Gerson-Teixeira-agravamento-da-concentracao-das-terras>

(2) The statistics on logging and cattle herd sizes were provided by the Centre for Research on the State, Society and Development in the Western Amazon at the Federal University of Acre (UFAC).