
Brazil: Support for Extractive Reserve on islands of Tucuruí Dam reservoir

For centuries, the inhabitants of the Amazon lived in balance with nature. The groups had small areas of land, the idea of property was unknown to them, and they were able to find everything they needed to live well. This style of life was destroyed by the arrival of the first Europeans, and ever since the exploitation of nature and its inhabitants has caused the extinction of species, loss of livelihoods and cultures, and more widespread poverty.

Amongst the many ways through which this exploitation took place, one of them was the construction of hydroelectric dams. Tucuruí Dam, the largest ever constructed in a tropical rainforest, flooded over 2,400 sq. km. of the Amazon. More than 30,000 people were expelled from their homes, including various indigenous groups. Tens of thousands of more living downstream lost their livelihood when fish stocks were depleted as a consequence of the dam. Many of these families moved to the reservoir area, occupying "islands" of the rainforest in Tucuruí Lake.

Now they are trying to create an Extractive Reserve which constitutes a new form of land designation in Brazil, a legacy of Chico Mendes' work which combines environmental protection with sustainable resource management by local populations. The Tucuruí Extractive Reserve would be the first established in an environmentally devastated area, and would have as its goal instituting resource management programmes capable of prolonging the viability of dwindling fish stocks in the lake, in the process guaranteeing the health and well-being of fishing and extractivist populations in the reservoir area.

The movement for the creation of an Extractive Reserve in the islands of Tucuruí Dam reservoir marks a return to the original history of the region, seeking a form of development that recognizes the value of the way of life of its people, and the preservation of natural resources. There are an estimated 1,100 islands in Tucuruí reservoir, where about 6,500 people are living. The islands were disappropriated by the Federal Government when Tucuruí Dam was built, and are considered to be an area of permanent environmental preservation.

The residents live by artisanal fishing, and the collection and extraction of forest products; they have no schools, medical assistance, or even electric energy. Since 1992 the movement has fought for the creation of the Reserve, but politics has meant the proposal has moved forward slowly, with many obstacles placed in the way.

Currently, all the necessary actions for the creation of the Reserve have been concluded, and the final decree authorizing the Reserve awaits the signature of the Brazilian President, Mr. Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

Please take part in the campaign for the creation of the extractive reserve in Tucuruí dam reservoir: Send letters, faxes, or emails to the following addresses:

The Amazon and its people thank you!

