

The new rubber boomlet

The Brazilian state of Acre is pioneering an approach to development that seeks to make the most of the rainforest

Brazil's first rubber boom, sparked by the invention of the car, ended abruptly with the successful cultivation of the rubber tree in Asian plantations. Its second, supplying the Allies after Japan cut off their rubber sources during the second world war, barely outlasted the fighting. Both made millionaires of rubber bosses—and near-slaves of those who tapped and cured the latex. Now, in the Amazon's most remote regions, rubber is making a tentative comeback. This time the rubber-tappers are trying to write the script.

The murder by ranchers in 1988 of Chico Mendes, who led the rubber-tappers' struggle against loggers and ranchers, sealed an alliance with environmentalists. It also planted seeds of change in Acre, Mendes's home state, which has been run by self-styled "governments of the forest" since 1999. They have helped extrativistas—forest-dwellers who harvest sustainable products—to form co-operatives, to diversify beyond traditional crops of rubber and Brazil nuts and to seek new markets.

The aim, says Tião Viana, the state's governor, is to make standing forest more valuable than logging and ranching so that Acre can protect trees without sacrificing development. Since 1999 the state has been mapped and zoned, with much of its forest protected as parks or reserved for Amerindians or extrativistas. Some, mostly small-scale, farmers still clear forest illegally. But the rules have broadly stuck. Some previously deforested areas must be replanted; some can be used for low-impact farming, and others are used for forest-product industries. "We don't need to clear any more land," says Mr Viana. "But we're not afraid to use what has already been cleared for development."

In Xapuri, Mendes's home-town (see map), a factory named after him shells and packs wild Brazil nuts. It is run by Cooperacre, a co-operative of more than 2,000 small producers. Nearby Natex, the world's only condom-maker to use latex from wild rubber trees, buys its raw material from 700 rubber-tapping families. It pays them a bit more than the market rate, and the state government adds a subsidy in recognition of their role in protecting the forest. The federal government buys the plant's entire production of 100m condoms a year as part of its national anti-AIDS programme.

Seringal Veneza, a rubber-tappers' reserve near Feijó, is too far from Natex to supply it. But a group of 32 families there is using techniques developed at the University of Brasília to process latex on-site. The resulting rubber sheets are easier to store and transport, and fetch a much higher price. Veja, a French shoe firm, is a customer and Flavia Amadeu, a designer based in Rio de Janeiro, is training the rubber-tappers to dye and texture the sheets to be made into jewellery.

Roads get rural dwellers to health clinics and schools, and extrativista products to market. But they also make it easier to bring in the chainsaws. Mr Viana is paving the last stretch of the highway that links Acre to the rest of Brazil, while trying to limit its impact on the forest. Near Feijó, cultivated plots act as a buffer between the road and virgin land: in 2000 the state granted 4.5-hectare (11-acre) plots of degraded pasture along the roadside to family farmers. Those who reforested and eschewed the use of fire for clearance were given seeds, training, help finding buyers and a grant of 500 reais (\$240) a year.

Brazil nuts, rubber and açaí (an Amazonian fruit) can earn a family up to 2,000 reais a month, estimates WWF-Brazil, a conservation group that works with Acre's government and the extrativistas. That income could be boosted by adding more crops, such as other fruits and jarina seeds, which look and feel like ivory, and beekeeping. Fish farming is promising: the pirarucu, a large Amazonian species, fetches high prices and offers a source of protein to replace beef.

There is scope, too, for branding: Natex's government-issue condoms come in plain packaging so that nothing distracts from their safe-sex message. A mooted commercial line could sell lovers the chance to protect the forest as well as themselves.

For more than a decade now Acre's rate of economic growth has outpaced the Brazilian average. Its schools and health care have got better, and poverty and illiteracy fallen, far faster than the average, too. But scaling up the state's bespoke policies of paternalist sustainable development across the region would be hard, as well as expensive. Acre is small—only 3.5% of the Amazon (though still larger than England). And little of it lies within the “arc of deforestation”—the border between existing farmland and forest—where slash-and-burn farming is most tempting. That has made it easier to resolve land disputes and enforce zoning laws. Perhaps the most important lesson for other states from Acre's example is simply that tree-friendly policies can be people-friendly, too.



Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 405, n. 8813, p. 43, 1 a 7 Dec. 2012.