

Xixuau-xiparina Reserve: A model of conservation in the Amazon Rainforest

by Chris Clark, Director of Amazon Association

The Xixuau-Xiparina Reserve is an area of 450,000 acres of pristine rainforest within the Roraima State of Brazil. It is located 450km north west of Manaus, on the confluences of the Xixuau and Xiparina creeks and the Jauperi River.

The reserve is under the management and protection of a Brazilian NGO, the Amazon Association (AA), formed by and for the benefit of the native inhabitants of the region. The Association was founded in 1992 on the premise that it is only possible to preserve the remaining intact areas of the Amazon rainforest through poverty relief and the active participation of the local inhabitants, the true guardians of their natural environment.

The association was born through the casual meeting of a group of people from the Amazon and Great Britain. I had been travelling in the Amazon since 1984 with a local native he met on his first trip. Plinio Encarnacao is now the president of the Amazon Association and it was the friendship between these two men, which led to the creation of the Association and the Xixuau-Xiparina Nature Reserve. In fact on their joint travels to many parts of the Amazon they always took the time to make a return visit to the Rio Jauaperi, which they discovered on the first trip together back in 1984.

Over the years they got to know the local people and one day in 1990 a group of village elders asked them to a meeting where they stated that in view of the number of years the two of them had been coming to the area, and in view of the problems the local people were facing, some form of cooperation should be established between them.

The locals suffered from total lack of infrastructure for health, education, transport and any form of economic possibilities. Many of them were being forced to emigrate to the slums of cities like Manaus, Novo Ayrão and Barcelos where at least they could earn a meagre living as manual labourers and have their children enrolled in a school and treated in the event of illness.

Thus was born the Association with the explicit aim of proving that it was possible to live in a dignified manner while preserving the incredible natural environment of the Xixuau and Xiparina rivers. The locals would take care of the



Emanuel Evangelista and members of the Xixuau community

environment and quickly made rules for its conservation, such as no hunting, logging or commercial fishing in the area. They even went as far as forbidding motorised transportation inside the reserve in order not to disturb the animals and fish. In exchange Plinio and I went looking for resources to improve their standard of living.

Within a few years two schools had been built. A health post and project with the University of Siena in Italy and the National Health Foundation of Amazonas, saw the virtual elimination of malaria from the river. Until then a population of 450 people had been recording an average of 2,000 cases a year. In 2009 there were 13 cases.

In 1996 the Association made a formal legal request to the government of Roraima state for the Xixuau-Xiparina area to be declared an official conservation unit. The request was turned down due to the uncertainties regarding legal ownership of the land in the area. As often occurs in the Brazilian Amazon there is confusion between federal, state, local government or local people ownership. In 2001, once it became clear that the land belonged to the Federal government the Association approached them in Brasília and began the process for the creation of an Extractive Reserve based on the model created by the murdered rubber tapper and Nobel Prize winner, Chico Mendes.

IBAMA, the environment administration institute accepted and began the legal process. In the meantime the Association continued improvements in the area finding funding to purchase river boats for the local communities, to install village wells, the first solar powered satellite internet link in the Amazon, and consequently a multi-media school in the reserve.

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Photo: Rainforest Concern

In 2009 a trust was formed in London to help the work of the Association and possibly other projects in the Amazon. The Amazon Charitable Trust was brought into being on the strength of an idea by ex-City banker Robert Pasley-Tyler and has as trustees Peter Bennett of Rainforest Concern, Dr John Hemming, ex director of the Royal Geographical Society, Bianca Jagger, human rights activist and environmentalist, Sir Ghillean Prance, ex director of Kew Botanical Gardens and Virgilio Viana, now director of the Sustainable Amazonas Foundation and ex state secretary for the environment. Plinio, president of the Brazilian Association took advantage of an invitation to receive an international environment award in Rome, to attend the inauguration of the Amazon Charitable Trust in London immediately afterwards.

Enjoying a caiparinha on the long journey from Manaus to the Xixuau Reserve

Opposition from local politicians to the creation of the Extractive Reserve led to a large number of delays and problems, but at the same time brought in other actors like the WWF with the ARPA (Amazon Region Protected Areas) project. The reserve is inside the planned mosaic of conservation units, which forms the Central Amazon Ecological Corridor that is financed by the World Bank and is part of the G7 Pilot Project for the Protection of the Amazon. The association was also joined by the Social Environment Institute, the Vitoria Amazonica Foundation, The Amazon Working Group and a number of other Brazilian government and civil society institutions.

In 1993 I moved permanently to the reserve and had been coordinating the process for the creation of the Extractive Reserve and the activities of the local community ever since. An ecological tourism activity was begun, as well as a craftworks cooperative of local women. Recently the inhabitants of the Xixuau have created their own cooperative to enlarge their sustainable commercial activities to also include harvesting and packaging of brazil nuts and other forest products as well as increasing tourism.

In 2000 a young Italian biologist, Emanuela Evangelista, came to the Xixuau to do her thesis on the giant river otters of the reserve. She subsequently joined the Association and became the president of the Italian branch. Ever since then Emanuela has lived between Italy and the Amazon and has become an integral part of the organisation as well as continuing her research and even expanding it to other species of aquatic mammals, such as the fresh water dolphin.

The incredibly clear waters of the Xixuau and Xiparina rivers and the abundance of aquatic fauna due to nearly 20 years of integral protection, have led to the reserve becoming the foremost destination for underwater documentary makers in the Amazon. In the words of Jean Michelle Cousteau "I have seen other rivers in the Amazon with the same clarity of water as the Xixuau, but none with a similar abundance of aquatic wildlife." The cooperative Xixuau is thinking of developing a restricted form of diving tourism in the reserve. Photographers, film makers, birdwatchers, fishermen and nature lovers can get a unique view of Amazon flora and fauna in the area as well as seeing how a model community lives and preserves its natural heritage.



Photo: Rainforest Concern

Giant river otters can frequently be seen on the Xixuau river



Photo: Rainforest Concern

Canoeing, the only transport at the reserve

This Trust is based in Berkeley Square in London and is, together with Rainforest Concern, actively supporting the work of the Association and the creation of the Extractive reserve, which will enlarge the protected area from 178,000 to 630,000 hectares.

The process for the creation of the reserve is now completed and it is undergoing legal analyses in the Casa Civil, Interior Ministry, in Brasilia. Once this is completed it will be placed before President Lula for him to sign the decree bringing it into being.

Responsible and carefully controlled tourism represents an important source of income for the local community and offers a unique opportunity for visitors to see an unspoilt and practically unknown part of the world. The local cooperative is in the process of building a new visitors structure in the reserve.

Now begins a new challenge for the Amazon Association, which is to provide services and a standard of living comparable to that in the Xixuau to a further 800 traditional inhabitants in another 8 villages in the new reserve. The model has proven to work in the Xixuau and it needs to be expanded to the entire 630,000 hectares of the Extractive Reserve.



Photo: Amazon Association

Caimans living in the reserve's lagoon are accepted as part of the scenery!

Once the local people are convinced that conservation provides them with a means of survival they will abandon commercial fishing, logging, illegal turtle hunting and other activities, which damage the ecosystems of the region and will take up their role as guardians of the forest. In the opinion of the Amazon Association this is the

only realistic way the forest can be saved for current and future generations

It is possible to visit the reserve to see first hand the activities of the Association. Small groups of from 6 to 15 people travel by riverboat from Manaus along first the Rio Negro and then the Jauaperi. The visitors stay in the local village in maloca lodges built from wood and thatch in the style of the local Indians. The days are dedicated to outings by canoe, walks in the forest, bird watching and animal sightings, fishing and getting to know the local customs and life style. Among many other species it is possible to see in the Xixuau are sloths, giant otters, river dolphins, manatees, caimans (type of alligator), several species of monkey, anteaters, armadillos, macaws and toucans and even a jaguar if you are lucky! On his recent trip to Xixuau, Peter Bennett and I witnessed a melanistic or 'black' jaguar from our canoe.



Photo: Rainforest Concern

Chris Clark, Director, Amazon Association (left) and Robert Pasley-Tyler, Director of the Amazon Charitable Trust (right), with Niyeji

If you are interested in supporting this project or visiting the wonderful Xixuau Reserve please contact us at Rainforest Concern or contact Chris Clark directly at xixuauxiparina@hotmail.com