

Is there a future for mahogany? Edited by Andrew MacLellan



A view from the forest floor: the impact of logging on indigenous peoples in Brazil

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The social impact of the mahogany trade on the indigenous peoples of Brazil is described. Emphasis is placed on the violence directed against Indians and the consequences of the destruction of their environment which results from the trade. Also mentioned are the judicial issues regarding the illegal extraction of mahogany from protected areas and several of the court cases against logging companies. A moratorium on mahogany logging in Brazil is advocated as is the right of indigenous peoples to control their lands and resources as the way to conserve their environment.

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ADDITIONAL KEY WORDS:—Arara – Araweté – Gavião – Guajajara – Kampa – Kayapó – Korubo – Nambiquara – Sakiribar – Suruí – Tikuna – Urueu Wau Wau.

CONTENTS

Introduction	75
Social impacts	76
Loggers' tactics	78
Lack of control	79
Conclusions	80
Note added in proof	81
References	81

INTRODUCTION

“The Indians cut trunks of wood, placing them on the beaches to be loaded on to the boats. In exchange they received steel machetes, drinks, weavings, mirrors and coloured beads” (Campos, 1992).

Little has changed since this was written nearly five centuries ago when Indians and Europeans first exchanged goods. Exchange soon led to exploitation of the Indians by the Europeans. As we approach the millennium it is clear that today's timber trade is no different — it is a trade which exploits indigenous peoples, violates many of their rights, has destroyed the social fabric of many communities and, in some cases, is responsible for the deaths of individuals. Behind all the figures and statistics of the trade, the impact it has on indigenous societies remains relatively hidden.

Historically, indigenous peoples the world over have suffered the consequences of

the massive invasion and despoliation of their land by outsiders. Wherever a product has a value, the ensuing exploitation has often been irrational and uncontrolled. The timber industry in the Brazilian Amazon is proving to be no exception. Mahogany, due to its high international market value, has become much sought after and is found in 311 indigenous areas in Brazil (CEDI, 1993).

SOCIAL IMPACTS

The predatory nature of mahogany logging in Brazil has led to substantial destruction of the forest in many indigenous areas. One of the most devastating consequences is the network of roads built illegally into the reserves. In a 1993 report, Greenpeace estimated that in South Pará 3000 km of roads had already penetrated Indian and other protected areas (Greenpeace, 1993). In the Xikrin do Cateté reserve alone, since the mahogany was dispersed over a large area, its extraction entailed the construction of 130 km of primary roads and 173 km of secondary roads to log 600 mahogany trees (Vidal & Giannini, 1991).

Apart from the destruction that road construction itself brings, the roads act as a magnet for uncontrolled colonization. For example, the Bannach timber company illegally built a road which cut right through the Arara reserve to link their sawmill, also built illegally within the reserve, to the Trans-Amazon highway. This has attracted over 1500 colonist families with devastating consequences for the 130 surviving Arara people who are seeing their land swallowed up before their eyes. Some colonists are employed by Bannach in their logging and sawmill operations and the local authorities, anxious to attract political votes, are attempting to set up a municipality in the area around the sawmill to encourage further settlement (Monbiot, 1992; Survival International, 1992a).

Logging and ensuing colonization in indigenous areas have contributed to dramatic falls in the levels of Indians' food resources, particularly game. In turn, nutrition levels are falling in indigenous areas which are invaded. In a recent survey on hunger among indigenous peoples carried out by the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies (INESC), high levels of malnutrition were recorded among Indians correlating to those whose land has been invaded or disturbed (Verdun, 1994). Studies have shown that as protein levels in hunter societies fall, so fertility levels drop.

Worst of all, the logging roads act as corridors of disease. In an interview with *The Observer* in 1994 the President of Brazil's National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) stated "Wherever there is an influx of whitemen, garimpeiros and loggers the areas of contagion grow." (*The Observer*, 1994). Diseases transmitted by outsiders to which Indians have little or no resistance probably account for more deaths among indigenous peoples than anything else. In a report published in 1994 the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) stated that "in the region of the Vale do Javari the proliferation of mosquitoes and the increase in malaria is principally due to the presence of loggers in the region, penetrating further and further into the interior looking for hardwoods like cedar and mahogany, this encourages the proliferation of mosquitoes and is increasingly infesting new areas which up to now have not been contaminated." COIAB described the situation as calamitous and reported that 19 Indians in Javari died of malaria in that year (COIAB, 1994).

Other social effects include the introduction of alcohol and venereal diseases and the encouragement of prostitution among Indians. It is estimated that almost the entire adult Suruí population in Rondônia had contracted venereal diseases by 1991 (CIMI, 1991a). In a country with one of the highest rates of AIDS, the consequences could be disastrous. Since Indians have little head for alcohol and little, if any, access to health care, the impacts of alcohol and sexually transmitted diseases are immense. Many men, hooked on alcohol and seduced by money and goods, stop hunting; thus food becomes scarce and families are forced to enter a market economy which all too frequently they do not understand. It does not take long for the vicious cycle of social disintegration, dependency and exploitation to take root. Skills such as hunting, and cultural heritage such as use of medicinal plants, etc. are soon lost.

The Catholic Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI) reported that loggers distributed cocaine to the Suruí and Cinta Larga to make them become addicts and so exchange wood for drugs.

Most at risk are those Indians who have no contact with the rest of society. FUNAI estimates there are 40 uncontacted groups in the Amazon — most of whom live in areas affected or threatened by logging. These peoples are extremely vulnerable to any form of contact, particularly sudden and uncontrolled incursions, as is the case with logging teams. Faced with firearms, they have no means of resisting or denouncing invasions. Disease can quickly decimate uncontacted peoples. The Nambiquara were virtually wiped out in what was later described as the Biafra of Brazil when they were contacted and their lands were opened up to exploitation. Estimated at 3000 in the mid 1930s, the population numbered only 530 by 1975 (Survival International, 1980).

As well as cultural disintegration, invasion of Indian land frequently results in hostilities and violence. Many Indians have been forced to defend their lands and this has resulted in armed conflict with deaths on both sides. Few Indians can match the firearms of logging teams. The most notorious murders took place in 1988 when a local logger hired 20 gunmen to murder a group of Tikuna Indians who had opposed his logging on their land. The Indians were due to have a meeting with the military police about harassment by loggers. When the Indians had gathered together, the gunmen ambushed the house and fired into it. Fourteen Indians were killed and 23 wounded. Although 11 gunmen were arrested they were subsequently released. At the time of reporting, nobody had been tried for this crime (Survival International, 1988).

It is impossible to give an accurate assessment of the number of assassinations of Indians due to logging conflicts, since many of these occur in remote areas and go unreported and uninvestigated. With the lack of official help, many Indians have been forced onto the defensive: the Nambiquara have burned logging equipment (Survival International, 1992b) and the Sakiriarabá have impounded machines (CIMI, 1992), but such attempts at resistance are invariably squashed or Indians suffer reprisals and the logging continues. The Urueu Wau Wau, contacted just over a decade ago, have killed loggers on their land but this has not stopped the trade. In 1991, after repeated requests to stop logging, the Cinta Larga killed five loggers believing they had no other choice (CIMI, 1991b). Human rights NGOs in Rondônia have stated that in areas of intensive logging such as in the Mequéns indigenous reserve which has been divided into lots by loggers, armed guards are employed to frighten off the Indians. In one police operation carried out in

Comodoro, Mato Grosso in December 1993, police discovered machine guns and ammunition hidden in one sawmill (CIMI, 1994).

LOGGERS' TACTICS

Illegal extraction of wood is carried out in a number of ways. Some contracts are arranged through individuals within FUNAI acting for the loggers. This is currently happening in Rondônia and south Pará. In June 1994 seven officials were dismissed from FUNAI Redenção and are being investigated for their dealings with loggers (Survival International, 1994). In February 1993 when federal authorities attempted to outlaw loggers from the Kayapó area the Indians went to Brasília to protest. Later it transpired their expenses had been covered by logging companies.

Deals made with communities in return for services have almost invariably not been honoured. The value of construction of amenities for example are grossly inflated and the value of the timber deliberately understated. Even when these contracts were outlawed the loggers resorted to bribing FUNAI officials and Indians aggressively. For example loggers gave the Gavião and Arara \$300 worth of goods, mainly in food to induce them to sign contracts (Greenbaum, 1989). In one notorious case the Guajajara Indians sold a truck of 12 000 cubic metres of wood for a sack of rice (CIMI, pers. comm.).

Cash deals too are no less exploitative. Sadly, many communities have no idea of the value of the wood they sell nor of what they receive for it. Loggers often make derisory payments for hardwoods; for example in the Guajajara reserve the Indians were paid £1.50 per cubic metre — the loggers will sell the wood for 60 times that price. It is difficult for Indians to quantify the amount of wood being logged. In 1992 the Xikrin of Cateté signed a contract with Perachi to fell 10 000 cubic metres (CEDI, 1993). However, local anthropologists estimated that loggers removed three times that amount.

Thus many communities have been seduced into seeing logging as a quick and easy solution to their problems. Some were transformed from hunter gatherer societies or subsistence economies to dependent consumers in such a short time that they have had no chance to adapt to the change. Whilst some may have viewed the spending power as a means of self-assertion or freedom, in reality it has brought them little lasting good.

The most common method used by the loggers is to make verbal or written contracts with a few Indians. By dealing with individuals the loggers have successfully managed to cheat whole communities of timber. More seriously they have created divisions and jealousies in the communities by favouring a few individuals and rewarding them with cars and other material possessions. In reality many gifts such as planes and cars are registered in the loggers' names. Thus predominantly egalitarian societies have developed hierarchical and exclusive structures. Last year a Kayapó child died of a treatable illness because his family could not get him to the nearest hospital, yet the same village is equipped with radios, a satellite television and its own plane, controlled by a few individuals (Survival International, 1993).

In addition to dividing communities loggers have also set one people against another: the Cinta Larga Indians who have signed logging contracts have helped loggers penetrate the Zoró indigenous area. Cases have also been cited among the

Kampa and Marubo where the Indians themselves are used as cheap labour in a form of debt bondage reminiscent of the rubber boom (CEDI, 1993).

The last tactic is sheer theft. Some peoples, for example the Parakanã, Araweté, Korubo, Marubo and Urueu Wau Wau simply do not want any form of timber exploitation on their land, and in some cases are unaware that it is being stolen.

Predatory logging is not just confined to indigenous areas. In October 1993 a joint operation between the National Council of Rubber Tappers and the Federal Police uncovered what has been described as a 'forest massacre' where 12 000 cubic metres of wood (10 000 cubic metres of it mahogany) from three extractive reserves in Acre were logged. This represents the felling of approximately 2000 trees. The logger in question was a subsidiary of a larger Belém company being investigated by the government Institute for the Environment (IBAMA) for illegal logging in the Kayapó area (Carvalho, 1994). Biological reserves have also been targeted; in the Guaporé Biological Reserve 7500 hectares have been felled (Greenpeace, 1993) and in the Gurupi Forest Reserve, where between 1961 and 1991 one third of the reserve, 2000 square miles, had been destroyed by invaders, including loggers (Balée, 1994).

LACK OF CONTROL

Since indigenous, human rights and environmental organizations began to campaign against the trade, logging companies have resorted to new tactics. Many large logging firms operate through middlemen who employ individuals or smaller companies, thus avoiding inspection and prosecution. Subsidiaries are easily created and screen the activities of the parent companies. As the trade is now channelled through small companies it is hard to know where the wood is going. It could be sold directly to the international market or to large timber companies, but data are lacking. Information has hitherto been limited to the Belém area, but there is evidence that a lot of mahogany is leaving other ports as contraband, a situation which needs to be investigated. Environmental NGOs in Brazil estimate that up to 70% of mahogany is exported.

By law timber companies must file management plans, but according to one human rights lawyer they are prepared by special offices and are totally fictitious. According to the Nucleus for Indigenous Rights (NDI): "There is not a single sustainable management plan for the extraction of mahogany, scientifically recognized as such, being executed in Brazil. These management plans are an instrument to legalize the unsustainable extraction of timber."

The role of IBAMA is thus seriously called into question. It is not uncommon for it to fine a company and then annul the fine. The superintendent of IBAMA, Mato Grosso was dismissed for dealings with logging companies (Núcleo de Direitos Indígenas, pers. comm.).

However, there have been some legal successes. The NDI has filed a number of lawsuits against various logging companies and individuals. One brought against Perachi, Maginco and Impar logging companies for logging in three Indian areas in Pará resulted in the judge ordering the immediate suspension of all logging activities and the sealing off of all illegal access roads into the reserves and he requested an environmental recovery plan. In another case, NDI demanded that Perachi and Bannach pay all the expenses for the environmental damage to the Xikrin area which could result in compensation of over 20 million dollars (NDI, 1994).

In lawsuits brought by NDI two individuals operating illegally in the Guaporé Valley reserve, the judge convicted the two of illegally extracting mahogany and directed that they should pay damages and submit an environmental recovery plan. The Federal Prosecutor's Office has also been active and recently obtained an injunction to suspend immediately all logging on Kayapó land.

However it should be borne in mind that the number of lawsuits brought by NGOs and the Federal Prosecutor's office are small in comparison to the number of illegal logging operations. Logging is illegal on any Indian land whether legally defined or not since the Indians are deemed to have original rights. The problem is, with undefined Indian land the case is much harder to prove.

Logging companies have even tried to file lawsuits in an attempt to nullify ministerial acts which have officially recognized Indian reserves. In Pará Bannach and Madeireira Sudoeste suits were filed in an attempt to overturn the Act which created the reserve of Trinchiera Bacajá; however, these suits were unanimously defeated in the courts (NDI, 1994).

While Brazilian government agencies like FUNAI and IBAMA are starved of funds there can be little hope for monitoring wood, enforcing fines and protecting those areas where it is illegal to log. Despite a number of dedicated individuals in these agencies, through lack of support by federal police and local judiciary they are often unable to withstand regular death threats and harassment by politically powerful timber mafia. Areas most at risk are those public areas outside Indian areas where there is simply no monitoring at all by either state bodies or NGOs.

CONCLUSIONS

Many Indians such as the Kayapó have argued that abandoned by the government and subject to invasion and disease on an unprecedented scale they sell wood as a last resort because they are forced into it. At the same time many realize that soon they will have nothing left, and the loggers will simply move on.

Many Indians are not against development, but instead are calling for rational development that will benefit and empower them whilst enabling them to control their resources. In the recently revised Indian Statute, which has still to be approved by the Brazilian Congress, Chapter III deals with 'Exploration of Forest Timber'; clear measures and provisions are set out. If these are properly enforced, they will go a long way towards addressing some of the current problems. Article 104 of the Statute states: "The utilization of natural resources of the forest for exploitation of timber in indigenous lands can only be carried out through forest management which has a sustainable output, and by projects which are integrally coordinated and implemented by indigenous communities, in the respective areas that they occupy, or by their organizations". However, while addressing the right for indigenous peoples to use and control their own resources many indigenous organizations seriously question the government's ability to enforce this legislation.

One Brazilian NGO has already spent several years in the severely degraded Xikrin reserve researching into the forest resources that remain and the possibilities of other economic alternatives to logging. With the active participation of the Xikrin, this has encouraged them to look at ways of managing the forest more rationally while still fulfilling their economic needs (ISA, 1995).

Above all, recognition of indigenous land ownership rights is fundamental both for

the survival of peoples and their environment. This is explicit in Article 14 of the International Labour Organisation Convention 169 concerning indigenous and tribal peoples which states "The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands they traditionally occupy shall be recognized", and in Article 15: "The rights of the peoples concerned to the natural resources pertaining to their lands shall be specifically safeguarded" (ILO, 1989).

In view of the gravity of the situation, over 70 indigenous, human rights and environmental NGOs in the Amazon are demanding a moratorium on the felling and trade of mahogany until the true extent of the damage of the industry has been assessed in both environmental and social terms (Anon, 1992a). This call has been broadly supported by many NGOs in this country. In the words of The Alliance of Indigenous Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests in their Charter: "The destruction of forests must be considered a crime against humanity and a halt must be made to the various anti-social consequences, such as roads across indigenous cultivations, cemeteries and hunting zones; the destruction of areas used for medicinal plants and crafts; the erosion and compression of soil; the pollution of our environment; the corruption and enclave economy generated by the industry; the increase of invasions and settlement in our territories." (Anon, 1992b).

NOTE ADDED IN PROOF

On 26 July 1996, responding to reports which indicated an increase in deforestation of the Amazon, the President of Brazil signed a decree suspending the authorisations and concessions for the exploitation of mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla* King.) and Virola (*Virola surinamensis* Warb.) in the Amazon region for the period of two years. Whilst this is a positive step forward, it remains to be seen how effectively the decree will be enforced.

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