

# Amazon Rubber Farmers from Brazil Have Global Plans

Contributed by Isaura Daniel  
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A group of rubber farmers from the cities of Machadinho do Oeste and Vale do Anari, in the northern Brazilian state of Rondônia, plan to start exporting the "fabric of the forest", a kind of cloth covered in latex, a liquid collected from rubber trees.

Production is in the hands of nine families of rubber farmers in three small industrial units. Up to the end of the month, five new units will be opened, and up to the end of the year they will total 30.

The fabric of the forest is made from raw cotton, which is then bathed in coloured latex. The appearance is similar to that of leather. It may be used in the production of garments, handbags, curtains, shoe parts and sofa covers.

Currently, however, the entire production is turned to the manufacture of handbags, production of which is in the hands of a group of 30 artisans from the city of Machadinho do Oeste.

Both cities currently produce around 810 pieces of the fabric, each 80 cm wide and 1.20 m long, every month. The objective, however, according to Erni Santos Lima, the president of the cooperative of rubber farmers (Coopflora), who is responsible for management of the process, is to be producing around 2,700 pieces a month by the end of this year. The number of rubber farmers to be working in production of the material should also exceed 100.

Expansion of the structure and of production is going to make it possible for the group to sell the material and products made from it in other Brazilian states and overseas.

Lima believes that the largest potential market for these products is Europe. Currently, the handbags are only sold in the state of Rondônia, at the studio where they are made.

Next month, however, the artisans are going to participate in a fair for products made in the Amazon in the city of Santarém, in the state of Pará, also in northern Brazil.

Within the next month, a training program for another 30 artisans should also begin in the city of Vale do Anari.

Training will be administered by the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) and by the Ministry of Environment, which have already been responsible for the training of the group in Machadinho do Oeste.

According to the coordinator of the Fabric of the Forest project at the Sebrae, Carla Paranhos, the institution implemented in the region a program called Strategic Management Turned to Results, with the objective of helping rubber farmers manage and increase production.

## Forest for Income

Despite being of commercial context, the objective of the organizations involved and of the Coopflora, which was established one year ago, is to take a new option of income to rubber farmers. The group worries with the promotion of sustainable work that preserves the environment.

For the extraction of latex, for example, a cut is made only on one side of the rubber trees, so that they may have a long life.

"We also want our grandchildren to be able to explore the forest," stated Lima. Coopflora was established by four local rubber farmer associations.

The area where the rubber farmers in the region work is currently made up of ten forestry reservations covering an area of 150,000 hectares of native vegetation which is part of the Amazon forest.

The president of the cooperative believes that the forest has a potential production of 25,000 pieces of fabric per month without harming the environment.

Since 1700

The fabric of the forest started being produced in both cities at the beginning of the 1990's as an alternative to rubber, which was very low priced at the time. But, the fabric has been produced informally by rubber farmers since 1700, explained Lima.

At that time, people covered sugar bags with latex so as to transport their belongings, their work clothes and the latex itself, as the product makes fabric impermeable.

It was between 1994 and 1996 that production of the fabric of the forest started being structured. The process for organization of the rubber farmers is still in progress.

The fabric is also produced in other states in northern Brazil, like Acre, but there it is called vegetable leather.

Coopflora  
Tel: (+55 69) 3581-2854  
E-mail: [godello@bol.com.br](mailto:godello@bol.com.br)

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