

# A Brazilian Frontier State Learns How to Make Ecologically Correct Furniture

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The northern Brazilian state of Acre definitely isn't a state symbol of furniture making in the country. In the capital city Rio Branco, for example, there are only 55 companies, according to the manager of the city's furniture hub, Elisângela Rocha.

The production is small, the consumer market is local and the word 'export' is barely pronounced. But from there comes one of the best examples of producing without devastating.

For nearly six years, the state government, in a partnership with the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) and international NGOs like WWF Brazil and The World Conservation Union (IUCN) are managing to increase awareness amongst businessmen to use only woods that have been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, which has the FSC stamp, also known as the "green stamp", globally renown as an environmental preservation guarantee.

Using FSC wood means working with material that comes from forest handling, a careful work of removing the wood that works in the following way: an area of 300 hectares is divided into 30 parts.

Every year, 10 hectares are exploited. On the 30th year, the part that was exploited in the first year is already naturally recomposed. To supervise this work and strengthen industrial production in the state, the government created the Forest Secretariat, the only one in the country, which has the aim of developing sustainable development in the region.

The office monitors the handling of three types of forests: public, private and extraction reserves, where are the rubber extractors and small agriculturists. Illegal woodcutting still happens, but the work done by the government and the NGOs has been hindering this kind of practice.

The project counts on a complete mapping of the regions to be exploited. How many trees of a determined species exist in that land and which of them may be cut down. If a species is in extinction, as is currently the case of mahogany, a whole research work is done to find out which wood could substitute it.

According to Carlos Rezende, secretary of Forest, there are six million hectares for handling, of which 2.7 million are occupied by the small landowners and extraction reserves.

## Heirs of Chico Mendes

For the rubber extractors, forest handling became an alternative source of income. The heirs in the fight by Chico Mendes, rubber extractor leader and environmental activist who was murdered in 1988 for fighting for the right to the land, started abandoning the forest during the 1990s when extracting rubber didn't yield returns anymore.

Today, many of them carry out all the activities, of woodcutting with extraction of rubber, nuts and oils. Some of them also work with cattle and care for small farms.

According to Marcelo Arguelles, coordinator at the NGO UICN Brazil, forest handling changed the life of many people in the forest communities. There are in Acre eleven communities, of which five have already been certified - in other words, have been trained to do forest handling - and two of them are in the certification process.

To defend the commercial interests of these workers, a cooperative was created nine months ago, the Cooperfloresta, which gathers six of these eleven communities, with 68 participants in all.

"In 2005, total production of Cooperfloresta reached 1,600 cubic meters, generating revenues of nearly 1 million reais (US\$ 456,000.). This wood is still being sold, but every participant should receive between 6,000 and 7,000 reais (US\$ 2,733 to US\$ 3,189) for the year, which would equal nearly two minimum wages per month," explains Arguelles, who is accompanying the work by the cooperative. In other words, they ensured an annual income for a job that takes up a maximum of two months of work.

According to Adriano Trentin Fanssini, manager at Cooperfloresta, the wood extracted by the participants is very valuable. As well as being a noble material, typical of the Amazon Forest, it takes the green stamp.

For this reason, the furniture makers from Acre still don't buy from the cooperative. "Our wood is too valuable to be sold for a low price. And they don't have the purchasing power to buy from us," says Fanssini.

The main buyers are from São Paulo, the largest business center in Brazil, in the southeast of the country. The furniture

makers from Acre who already buy the certified wood, normally wait for auctions held by the government, with wood extracted from the public forests.

#### Industrial District

To help the other side of the productive chain, the government created an industrial district in Rio Branco to gather the companies that occupied the urban zone in an irregular manner. Today, there are 12 companies there already. As well as creating an adequate space for their functioning, the idea of the hub is to offer technological structure, logistics and a design office for all.

According to Elisângela Rocha, manager of the hub, the prototypes of the furniture are created by this office and offered to the businessmen. Those interested in the project, go to the second phase, which is a study of commercial viability for the product.

The manager says that centralizing creation and design gave new life to the furniture in the region. And the businessmen started giving greater value to the design of their pieces. The government of the state of Acre invested US\$ 880,800 in the hub, created in 2004.

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