



Mahogany – the ‘Green Gold’ of Amazon destruction

Over the past 30 years 15% of the Brazilian Amazon has been completed destroyed, reaching over 590,000 square kilometres – an area larger than France. One of the main driving forces behind this destruction has been the dramatic increase in predatory and illegal logging. In 1970, the Amazon supplied just 12% of Brazil's production of tropical wood. Today it supplies 90% of the country's production of tropical wood, estimated at 30 million cubic metres per year¹.

In particular by one species - Brazilian mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) - makes the destruction of the Amazon possible by opening the door to destructive logging and development. This “green gold” of the Amazon fetches up to US\$1,600 per cubic metre (m³) in the international market, where as much as 70% ends up^{2 3}.

The Mahogany Belt is a region of dry land forests rich in valuable wood species and areas of ecological conservation. It covers some 800,000 square km of the Brazilian Amazon and stretches from the south of Pará to the State of Acre, crossing the north of Mato Grosso, Rondônia and the south of Amazonas states. Not by coincidence, the Mahogany Belt is known today as the “Deforestation Belt”.

In Pará State, the largest remaining concentrations of mahogany are largely found on Indian Lands. The high price of mahogany in the international market and the lack of sufficient control by the Brazilian authorities have only served to encourage the illegal exploitation on Indian Lands.

Two years ago, the Kayapó Indian chief Megaron was quoted by the newspaper ‘O Estado de S. Paulo’ as saying that Indians receive R\$ 50,00 (US\$ 20) to allow harvesting of a mahogany tree. The few logging companies controlling the market will export the same tree, reduced to 3 m³ of sawn timber after processing, for some US\$ 2,400 at the port of Belém. This incredibly large margin of net income explains why loggers are invading Indian Lands. Megaron, who is a strong critic of the system, said in the same article ‘Indians must ask loggers for more money’.

Roads to destruction

The relentless search for precious mahogany stocks, loggers have opened up thousands of kilometres of illegal roads in Pará State, now the largest producer and exporter of Amazon timber.

Very intensive and predatory logging practices have depleted of the mahogany stocks of the South of Pará. Illegal loggers have invaded Indian territories surrounding the Middle Land. In 1985, loggers opened more than 500 km of road leaving north from the town of Tucumã, invading Apyterewa Indian land.⁴ This road brought thousands of settlers to the area and the total area of Indian territory was reduced in size by the government.

¹ Ministry of Environment, technical note on deforestation in the Amazon and National Institute of Space Research (INPE), May 2001

² “The exploitation of a forest Amazon resource of high value: the case of mahogany”, Veríssimo, Barreto, Tarifa and Uhl, in ‘Ecology and Management’, 1995; and “Predatory harvesting of mahogany: a threat on the Amazon Future”, Greenpeace, 1992 (in Portuguese)

³ Hardwoodmarkets.com, August 2001

⁴ “O corte predatório do mogno: ameaça ao futuro da Amazônia”, Greenpeace Nov 1992



Many violent conflicts have been registered in Indian lands. "An unknown number of Indians have been murdered as a result of their opposition to logging in their reserves. Indians have been forced to take direct, sometimes violent action themselves in their attempts to halt the illegal incursions into their territories by loggers", according to the Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society.⁵

Recently loggers and miners also crossed the Xingu River heading west, invading public lands in the Middle Land.

Even the worldwide famous leader of the Amazon garimpeiros (gold prospectors), José Altino Machado, is bewildered by the speed of the invasion. In an interview published in August 2001, he said that loggers and farmers had opened 600 km of roads between São Félix do Xingu and Itaituba since 1995. "These roads are not at the edge of the Amazon Forest", he claims. "They are in the heart of it." José Altino became famous for leading an "army" of 40,000 'garimpeiros' who invaded the Yanomami Indian land in the 1980s. Today he is using his personal wealth and airplanes amassed from mining to help farmers and loggers to invade the Middle Land. According to José Altino, another 400 km of roads are currently being opened up.

Campaign History

Since the Earth Summit held in Brazil in 1992, Greenpeace has been campaigning for protection of mahogany and the Brazilian Amazon. The organisation campaigned to get mahogany listed on the Annex II of CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species) but the Brazilian Government has always led the opposition to this measure, arguing lack of evidence that the stocks are depleted.

In 1996, after the release of alarming data about deforestation by the Brazilian Institute of Space Research, and a strong campaign led by Greenpeace and other NGOs, the Brazilian Government put in place a two-year moratorium on new projects to exploit mahogany. The moratorium has been extended and is now valid until June 2002.

The Government also decided to fix annual quotas for exportation. The volume to be exported is determined every year and has been reduced progressively. In 2000, the quota was 50,000 m³. For 2001, the quota is limited to 30,000 m³.

In 1997, Greenpeace asked the Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to undertake an extensive inventory of the remaining mahogany stocks, promised by the Government since 1992. The inventory has still not been carried out.

In 1998, Greenpeace asked the Government to undertake an inspection of the forest management plans authorised to log mahogany. We are still repeating this demand today.

⁵ Watson, 1996, "A view from the forest floor: the impact of logging on indigenous peoples in Brazil", Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society, cited by Forest Monitor 1998.



Greenpeace investigations

2000

In July 2000, Greenpeace investigated the S. Felix do Xingu region and found illegal mahogany operations in the same region of Kayapó Indian Lands we investigated again in 2001. Video documentation of the findings was delivered to environmental authorities. In September 2000, IBAMA and Brazilian federal law enforcement authorities undertook Operation Xingu, which involved 22 IBAMA (the Brazilian environmental agency) inspectors and 16 Federal police agents.

According to inspectors who participated in operation Xingu, the investigation was very difficult and dangerous to undertake. For example a government helicopter was sabotaged when somebody placed diesel in its fuel tank and local petrol stations refused to provide service to government agents⁷.

On Tuesday, the 26 September 2000, agents in two helicopters landed in the log-yard called "Camaçari" on Kayapó Indian Lands. The agents couldn't find the loggers, who had disappeared. In their place, armed Kayapó Indians seized the group. After a long negotiation, chiefs Krekretum and Pykararankr, leaders of the village Cocraimoro, released the agents who left behind 1,900 m³ of mahogany they had tried to seize in the log-yard inside the Reserve. Funai's (the Indian representative body) local agent was appointed as a 'legal guardian' of the timber. The government tried to deny the seizure of its agents, but journalist Nicolau Farah, who was in one of the helicopters, confirmed this in a story published in Jornal do Brasil on 28 September 2000.

IBAMA and the Federal Police moved their base to São Félix do Xingu and inspected sawmills of the region of S. Felix, Xinguara and Tucumã. During this period, 15,917 m³ of logs and 237 m³ of sawn timber were seized. The companies involved received fines totalling R\$ 6 million (some US\$ 2.4 million). Of this total, 7,924 m³ of logs and 123 m³ of sawn timber were of mahogany.

In January 2001, three of the companies – Serra Dourada, Pirizina and Ouro Verde – received from a local judge a provisional decision allowing them to trade the mahogany. It was an extraordinary authorisation, as illegal timber is a federal crime, out of the jurisdiction of a local judge.

2001

In September 2001 a Greenpeace investigation team surveyed illegal logging operations in the Middle Land and in the Indian lands surrounding it. This is the third Greenpeace expedition to the area, following land and aerial surveys in 1999 and 2000.

Using GPS,⁸ digital video cameras and photographic equipment, Greenpeace found logging roads and airstrips on the Araweté and Apiterewa Indian lands, as well as in the Middle Land itself.

However, the most significant finding was located at the position S 07° 26'802" and W 052° 41'169". Greenpeace found and documented a large log-yard in the Kayapó land, on the left bank of the Xingu River, full of trucks, cars, bulldozers and hundreds, maybe thousands, of logs. A large road leaves from a log-yard into the Kayapó Menkagnoti forest, heading west. At the log yard, also used as the port, boats wait to take the logs to sawmills. An aerial survey of the log-yard exposed large log-rafts of mahogany heading down river in the direction of São Félix do Xingu, an important logging town at the edge of the Middle Land. Another smaller log-yard was documented at the edge of the Kayapó land,

⁶ See "Bigleaf Mahogany in Southeast Pará, Brazil, a Life History Study with Management Guidelines for Sustained Production from Natural Forests", James Grogan, Yale University, April 2001.

⁷ Personal information from one of the expedition leaders.

⁸ GPS – Geo-Positioning System, equipment oriented by satellite to locate a position on the ground.



on the right bank of the Xingu, north of the Kayapó and Gorotire land. Again, a logging road was found heading from the yard into the forest.

The Brazilian law forbids logging in Indian reserves.⁹ Greenpeace has delivered a copy of the video and photographs to the Federal Prosecution office and to IBAMA in Brasilia, to ask for further investigation on who is trading mahogany and other valuable species illegally harvested in Indian lands.

Summary

Today, there are only 13 remaining mahogany Forest Management Plans (FMPs) under 'legal' operation in the Amazon. All of them are in Pará State, inside the Middle Land or in its surroundings. The owners of 8 of these 13 projects have been involved in illegal logging, according to official data.

Greenpeace believes that 'legal' papers delivered by IBAMA, covering the few remaining FMPs, are being used to launder illegal mahogany exploited on Indian lands.

Recent Greenpeace investigations have flown over some of these FMPs and found little sign of any logging activity. Previous interviews with local people and loggers in the mahogany logging centres (Sao Félix do Xingu, Tucumã, Xinguara, Rio Maria, Redenção etc) – as well as with governmental authorities and independent researchers¹⁰ – have convinced our investigation team that there are very limited commercial stocks of mahogany outside of Indian Lands and federal reserves. Many articles in the Brazilian press confirm the invasion of Indian lands by mahogany loggers.

The continuous reports of illegal mahogany exploitation undermines the credibility of responsible traders in the international marketplace and of the Brazilian environmental authorities. Yet it can easily be solved if decisive action is taken by both the Brazilian government and in the marketplace.

Greenpeace call for action:

Greenpeace is calling on the Brazilian Government to:

- Undertake an immediate in-depth investigation of all current mahogany Forest Management Plans. This investigation should be carried out by Ibama with the participation of NGOs and the scientific community (The only exception should be the existing project on Xicrin land. Greenpeace believes that the involvement of NGOs and government technicians with this project, which aims to be FSC certified, is sufficient for insuring transparency and credibility).
- Permanently revoke all FMPs held by companies found laundering illegal mahogany logs or other species.

⁹ There is only one exception: a project of sustainable logging in the Xicrin Indian Land, which is authorized by the government. The project is being monitored by NGOs and aims to be FSC certified.

¹⁰ See "Bigleaf Mahogany in Southeast Pará, Brazil, a Life History Study with Management Guidelines for Sustained Production from Natural Forests", James Grogan, Yale University, April 2001.