The Experience of the Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve with Vegetal Leather:
Engaging Forest Product Markets for the Survival of Ecosystems and Cultures

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ABSTRACT
The Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve, in western Amazonia, is beginning to produce vegetal leather, a value-added rubber product used in the manufacture of shoes. The production of vegetal leather allows the people of the reserve to make a better living from forest products than is possible through extraction alone. Additionally, because the management of this project is local, production of vegetal leather allows the people of the reserve to work in dignity. In turn, this strengthens regional efforts for the conservation of forested areas.

I’d first like to say good afternoon to all of you, and to thank you for inviting me here, to be here among you for the first time.

I don’t have any slides to show you, but I do have my experience — my computer is my head. I will first describe our experience with vegetal leather in a few words.

The economic crisis in Brazil over the last few years has had a great effect on the traditional peoples of the forest, rubber tappers, and Indigenous workers, and has put their lives into a delicate balance.

VEGETAL LEATHER
The idea of producing vegetal leather came from the rubber tappers themselves, partly in reaction to the crisis we have been suffering in Brazil from the fall in the price of rubber. We had to search for an alternative — a way to produce rubber products rather than just sell the rubber itself. Vegetal leather is produced by coating cloth with raw rubber and then smoking it to make a durable, waterproof material. This technology had been used for years by rubber tappers to make waterproof bags out of old sugar sacks.

The proposal to develop vegetal leather was sent to Ecomercado in Rio de Janeiro and to Déjà Shoe. It came from rubber tappers in Boca do Acre who had started an experiment working with vegetal leather. So far it has been a very positive experiment — here I have a pair of Déjà Shoes made with vegetal leather from our area.

In the Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve (AJER) we began experimenting with producing vegetal leather last year. We produce the best — 96% of our product is of high quality, suitable for use in shoes.

Next to the extractive reserve there are two Indigenous communities — the Yawanawá and the Cashanawá — who are also producing...
and testing vegetal leather experimentally. It appears to be a viable response to the economic situation that the Indigenous people and the rubber tappers are facing today.

Why are we concerned about producing products from extractive activities? We are concerned because we are trying to improve the lives of the people who make their living from these products. We see vegetal leather as one of the real economic alternatives to the situation we face today in the Amazon, because this product is of very high quality.

With rubber there is a market problem — there isn’t one. Vegetal leather is an alternative that creates a market. However, we still face the same problem in that the production of vegetal leather does not guarantee a market for the rubber produced by the four different communities involved in this project. It is simply not yet enough to fulfill the needs of these communities.

We are just now in the beginning of this experiment, but our vision for the future, and the vision of the social movements with whom we work, is that we will produce not just the vegetal leather, but also the finished product — the shoes. However, in order to do this we need, first, to establish a market.

I’d like to stop soon so I can leave time for questions, but first, I’d like to mention our relationship with and the work we have been doing with the Indigenous communities. We have been working with them for many years, and I would like to tell you about some of the concerns we have.

CONSERVATION AND PEOPLE

One thing that I have heard about often, in Brazil and in my travels, is that everyone is always talking about biodiversity and conserving biodiversity — fighting to save the green and to keep the forest standing. However, what we need to start talking about is the life of the people who live in the forest.

Unless we can support the people who live in the forest, by helping them with education and health care, for example — unless we give the people who live within the forest a way of living there — then the forest will not continue to exist. Even today we have heard people asking “what will become of the Indigenous and traditional people of the forest?” I say that they will not lose their traditions if we are able to support them. If we are able to support them in these traditions, then we will preserve the green — we will keep the forest. If we speak only of preserving the forest without helping the people, then, as we speak, it will burn.

We can also see that if there was not this resistance, this struggle, on behalf of the Indigenous and traditional people of the forest,
there would not be the forest biodiversity that we still see today in the Amazon.

Talking about conservation and preservation of the forest is very interesting, but we must actually work to support the people who live in the forest, and help them to continue living in the forest, but with a better quality of life. If we do not do this, then the forest will die. Unless they have some way of living in the forest, the people of the forest will have to turn to cutting wood, commercializing game, or working for ranchers. In the past, Indigenous people and rubber tappers often worked for landowners for years and, at the end, had nothing to show for it but a gift.

Though some Indigenous people have lost their cultures, this is not because they wanted to lose them, but because they have been forced into it by outside forces. For example, in the 1940s, and more recently, during the military dictatorship, people were sent into the forest to kill Indigenous people. I think it’s very sad when you have people killing other people, and Indigenous people are human beings as well, after all. This is a tragic situation and we have to remember that losses of culture have been forced on these people by outside forces.

I would like to speak less to allow more time for questions about our experience in running an extractive reserve. I am entirely at your disposal for the next two days — which really is not enough to describe my 17 years spent working in this area.

**QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION**

**Q:** Does the independent production of vegetal leather further the tension between the producers and local cattle ranchers?

**CG:** The violence in these areas has decreased, in fact, because vegetal leather is being produced from areas inside Indigenous and extractive reserves. These reserves were already demarcated by the government, so production there does not affect relations with the ranchers. The economic situation in Brazil is such that it does not affect only forest workers — it also affects the ranchers who are living off their land. Nevertheless, the violence in our area has diminished, partly due to pressure from within our communities as well as from outside. For that, I would like to thank those of you from outside of Brazil who exerted this pressure to stop the violence in my area.

**Q:** To what extent has the market for vegetal leather and other products reached beyond green consumers? Is there a market in Brazil — do consumers in Brazil see this as a product out of their own forest?
Right now we’re really still in an experimental phase, so the product does not yet have a large market. We hope that in the future we will be able to reach a larger market both in Brazil and internationally.

Mr. Ginú is a rubber tapper from the Alto Juruá river in the state of Acre, northwest of the Amazon. He was recently elected president of the Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve (AJER) dwellers association. Despite strong local opposition from rubber barons and cattle ranchers, AJER has fulfilled all the legal requirements necessary for rights to use the land. They have organized a cooperative, the Associação Alto Juruá, and encourage active community participation.
Chico Ginú Working Group

The discussion focussed on the events leading up to the formation of the Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve, and covered some of the conceptual details of administering an extractive reserve.

**Beto Borges, Rainforest Action Network:** The importance of adding value to forest products and the importance of catering to the green market is always mentioned. However, Sharon Flynn from CI said that the green market is not a reality, that people are not really willing to pay more for green products. What does the Rubber Tappers Association think about it? What is the best way to deal with this type of green product — one that claims it will help the rainforest? Might this green market be just a passing fad and might it not be better to study the real market?

**Chico Ginú:** This problem is one that we have always had: dependency on outside forces. That is why we are doing this experiment right now with vegetal leather. This is an experimental process that came from us. The idea is to create a direct link between the community and the market. We are trying to link the community directly to the market, because if we have an intermediary it is always the producer that ends up losing. So, in our work with Déjà Shoe we are very thankful for this project we are doing with them, but we have no intention of staying only with them. We have to go beyond and look for other markets. Vegetal leather is a new process, and we are also looking for other new products from nature. We know that alternative products exist in the forest, but we need more study and research to identify them.

**Peter Wilshusen, moderator, Yale F&ES:** I would like to know if dealing with the market and the influx of income from this new product is causing any adverse impact in the community.

**CG:** Well, the real problem is always the fact that we do not have money. So, to deal with this new source, we have a sector which works with finances to administer the money.

**PW:** I asked this question because I know of many organizations that began with no money and experienced problems when outside money began to come in. Still, it appears that AJER is more organized than these groups, and might be better able to cope with this situation.

**CG:** We hope that in the future we will develop our own projects. Right now we need outside help, and contributions are welcome, but in the future we want to do things on our own, because ultimately, we do not want to be dependent on outsiders.
Austin Troy, Yale F&ES: Does your organization have any connection with the government, local or regional?

CG: The extractive reserve is in a federal area, and sometimes we get some support from the regional and local governments, but the main connection is that the federal government demarcated the area.

Steve Schwartzman, Environmental Defense Fund: Could you explain the history, the process, and difficulties in forming a concession and developing a management plan?

CG: The extractive reserve started as a resistance movement by the rural workers’ unions. In 1978, when the first union offices were founded in the seringais — the rubber producing states — there was a lot of pressure because this was something very new and many people did not know what to think about it. Most of the land was owned by large ranchers and seringalistas (rubber barons), and the rubber tappers had no rights, not even the right to set their own prices for the products they made. You mentioned that 70% of the land in Brazil is owned by 1% of the people, but in our region, 100% of the land is owned by them, so there was considerable pressure exerted against the unions.

Rubber tappers live isolated in the jungle, without access to education or health services. Often, for example, if tappers sold rubber to someone other than the rubber baron, the land owner would bring in the police to beat or kill the workers.

So, we started to become more organized, and we based our organization on the Estatuto da Terra — a 1964 law stating that a person could lay claim to land for himself if he or she lived peacefully and uncontested on it for a period of time. This was an old law, one that was never enforced, so part of our struggle was to use the legal system to make sure that the statute would be respected. In 1985 we had the first national meeting of rubber tappers and since then, our movement has been growing and growing.

So, the Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros (CNS, the National Council of Rubber Tappers) came from the union movement and we tried to have more power in the national and international arena. The major fight of the CNS was the creation of the extractive reserves, which is related to agrarian reform for the rubber tappers. In 1989 we had the second meeting of the CNS and we created a Board of Directors for the Council, because before we had only members. After this second meeting we started to move ahead — towards creating the extractive reserves. The purpose of the extractive reserve was the expropriation of land from rubber patrons. The land would become...
owned by the federal government but the rubber tappers would have the right to live on and to use the land.

In the first proposal for the creation of an extractive reserve, we had support from the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General, and we were able to create the first Extractive Reserve, the Juruá, and launch the movement.

Another thing that helped our movement was the death of Chico Mendes, because it created national and international pressure. Thereafter, the Brazilian government started to expropriate land to create the extractive reserves. But then things stalled, and for two years the extractive reserves existed only on paper.

Eventually, we had to pressure the government to implement the decree, so that the reserves could become a reality. In 1991 we had two general meetings with all the people in the communities and with technical support from professors and anthropologists. There, we discussed a plan for the use of the reserve. Then we submitted our land use proposal to the IBAMA, the Brazilian environmental agency which would have the responsibility of administering extractive reserves. IBAMA analyzed our plan and made comments, and we spent 6-8 months in this review process. The proposal kept coming and going with corrections and changes, and in the end, the final changes were completed last October 7.

Now we are using this plan and soon, by next April or May, we will receive the formal concession that will give us legal rights. So, for example, in the same way that the Congress makes laws under the Constitution, in the same sense we created the laws for the extractive reserves, and these laws are going to be observed by the people who live there. This land use plan encompasses everything — fishing, hunting, extraction of forest products, and everything else. This document regulates the use of the reserve. Next May we will get the legal document that states that the land is owned by the government, but that we, the rubber tappers, have the right to live and work there for the rest of our lives — we just cannot sell it.

Andi Eicher, Yale F&ES: If someone in the community breaks the rules, for example, tries to sell or clear land, how will you deal with it?

CG: Well, the government will not hire a bureaucrat to monitor land use in the reserve — they do not like to live in the forest. When we created the extractive reserve we became a legal entity with autonomy, so we can have our own rules. We created a Board of Directors that is elected by the people of the community, and we have people from the communities being trained by IBAMA to
be monitors of land use. These people are responsible for monitoring the land and, if infractions happen, they will inform the Board of Directors.

The incident will be discussed by the Board, and if they find that our community laws have been broken, people will be penalized for breaking them. However, this will not be done in a violent form.

I have two examples of community rules that are fundamental to the management of the reserve: 1) if a rubber tapper moves from an area to work in another part of the reserve, he must inform the Board; 2) if he wants to cut a tree to make a boat, he should get authorization for this. Why are these rules necessary? Because we have registered the location of each rubber tapper to control extraction, so we need to know when people move. Also, the authorization to cut trees is necessary because there exist outside pressures from people who want to buy timber, and we have to prevent the destruction of the reserve.

**BB:** Let’s say someone is breaking the rules, for example, hunting with a dog. What would be the penalty?

**CG:** Usually, in the first case a warning is given to the person. If the person breaks the rules again, the community meets and decides what penalty can be applied. In the worst case they may even expel the person. This has never happened yet. What often happens is that the person is reprimanded by the community, and the individual chooses to obey the rules thereafter.