



Voices

JULY 2001

In 1992, Gregorio Riquez migrated from Peru's high jungle to the thinly populated province of Ucayali in the steamy lowlands of the Amazon Basin. When he first left the mountains, he envisioned the lowland Amazon as a land of opportunity for people willing to work. However, he soon discovered that hard work and bigger tracts of land were not enough to ensure survival in one of the most challenging environments in the world. He and his wife, Julia Flores, quickly found themselves and their children teetering on the edge of starvation. They cleared land, burned brush, planted crops, yet were unable to escape poverty. They watched helplessly as torrential rains washed the topsoil away. They lost two children—a 13-year-old son, who succumbed to worms, and an 8-month-old daughter, who died of a fever. Both deaths, Mr Riquez says, were caused less by disease than by a lack of money for medicine.

The story of the Riquez family is not unique. On the contrary, their odyssey and subsequent struggle has been repeated by countless families throughout the Peruvian Amazon. Immigrants arrive in the jungle only to learn the hard way that by using the agricultural techniques with which they are familiar, the infertile, acidic soils of the region can support at best two years of food crops. Farmers typically clear one or two hectares, work them for two to five years, and then clear more land when yields drop dramatically. Fields are usually left fallow for four or five years. Yields are lower in subsequent plantings, and more land must be cleared. It is a vicious cycle with disastrous consequences—and not only for the

"Before, we used to work every day just to stay alive. We used to slash and burn because we didn't know there was another way. I look at these trees [on my farm] now and I am filled with hope. They are beautiful to me. They deserve our care and love. Now we're working to ensure our future."

— GREGORIO RIQUEZ



farmers. The forests of the Peruvian Amazon are disappearing at a rate of about 270,000 hectares per year—roughly 0.4 percent of the total area. One of the greatest causes for this loss is slash-and-burn farming.

To end this cycle of devastation, ASB scientists are collaborating with farmers to develop and promote sustainable land-use systems that offer an alternative to slash-and-burn farming. Researchers believe that by planting a mix of trees and annual crops, farmers should be able to support themselves on much less land than they currently require—improving their incomes in the process. By employing farming techniques that counter land degradation, farmers are not forced to clear new land as frequently, reducing some of the pressure on natural forests. In the case of Mr. Riquez, for example, the use of 'vetiveria' grass (*Vetiveria zizanioides*) has been very effective in controlling erosion on plots where he is experimenting with new tree crops. He also uses the shoots of the vetiveria to strengthen the roof of his house, and he derives a small income by selling the grass to producers who live on higher slopes where erosion poses a bigger problem. Cash crop alternatives that have good market prospects and protect the environment are urgently needed—identifying these alternatives is a challenge shared by ASB and the Riquez family. Although their prosperity is by no means secured—local demand for products is limited and transport links are poor—the Riquezes have now dared to revive the hope that led them to the rainforest in the first place.

ASB Voices is published by the Alternatives to Slash-and-Burn (ASB) Programme. The series aims to convey for a broad audience the insights and perspectives from people's real-life experiences and challenges in the humid tropics.

This brief was developed with contributions from Julia Flores and Gregorio Riquez; Jonathan Miller; Douglas White of CIAT; and Julio Alegre, Luis Arévalo, Merle Faminow, Ruben Guevara, Jessa Lewis, Debra Lodoen and Thomas Tomich of ICRAF. Funding was provided by the Government of the Netherlands.

ASB encourages free dissemination of its work when reproduction is for non-commercial purposes. Portions of this document may be quoted or reproduced without charge, provided the source is acknowledged. ©2001 Alternatives to Slash-and-Burn