



Voices

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Acre State, in the far west of the Brazilian Amazon, lies in one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on our planet. It is a place where settlers driven by poverty elsewhere in Brazil go to seek opportunities to make their fortune. Each year, farmers clear more of the huge trees on the 80-hectare plots allocated to them by the Brazilian Government. The trees are cut and burned, not because settlers want to destroy rainforests, but because they are in a race against time and nature to establish a sufficient foothold to provide for their families. Many have failed in this challenging environment, especially those among the first wave of settlers in the 1970s. But there is money to be made for those with the skill, luck and determination to establish themselves. Cattle have helped people survive and, often, make substantial profits despite poor market links, labor shortages and lack of bank loans. Cattle are assets “on the hoof”—their requirements fit well into a family operation and they can walk to market when cash is needed. Raising cattle using current techniques requires about one hectare of pasture per animal and substantial areas of forest must be cleared to support a herd.

In contrast to many of his neighbours who came from distant parts of Brazil and knew little about managing the forest resources they found in the far west, Virgulino da Costa Nascimento has encyclopaedic practical knowledge about the rainforest. Born in Acre, he is the son of rubber tappers—bonded laborers who derived a meager living from the wild rubber native to the Amazon and from other forest-based activities. To find a better life, Virgulino joined the settlement scheme as a young man, and he clearly has succeeded. He and his wife Raimunda developed their first plot and were able to save enough to buy an adjacent farm. They have raised five children: two live in town and the three younger girls hope to follow their siblings off the farm when they finish school.

"I want to look into ways to use the forest remaining on my farm instead of clearing it. Someday, maybe I'll even be able to reforest some of my pastures."

— VIRGULINO DA COSTA NASCIMENTO



T. Tomich

Now this son of foresters, who became a farmer, is turning his thoughts back to the forest. Despite Virgulino's success with cattle, he readily recalls the myriad uses for the forest that he learned in childhood and is well aware that his remaining private forest contains unique and potentially useful trees and plants. If the economic value of natural products remaining in privately held forests can be realised, trees don't need to fall—at least not in such great numbers. But changes are needed in order for Virgulino and his neighbours to make a living from managing forests instead of converting them to pastures. Markets for wood and other forest products need to be developed, marketing barriers dropped and distribution systems improved.

These changes are beyond the influence of Virgulino and his fellow settlers, but are within the grasp of scientists and policymakers. A key task of ASB scientists is to see how emerging opportunities fit with farmers' objectives and present-day constraints. Scientists of Brazil's national agricultural research system Embrapa (Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária), who spearhead ASB work in the Brazilian Amazon, are reorienting their research to explore these new options. In a dramatic shift in priorities, the Embrapa station in Acre now aspires to become the centre of excellence for sustainable natural forest management. This vision of future possibilities is shared by the political leadership of Acre, where "Governo da Floresta" now is displayed on State vehicles and public buildings. This motto signals that Acre's policies focus on sustainable use of forest resources. With scientists and policymakers working in partnership with people like Virgulino, there is hope that a new set of opportunities can be created for the forests to be the foundation of livelihoods for the people of Acre.

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.

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