
The contradictions of conservation: The territory of the Ka'apor in the Brazilian Amazon

The eastern portion of the Brazilian Amazon has the highest rates of deforestation and forest degradation in the country. Yet, in this vast territory there are still large areas in a good state of protection, which—as scientific studies from various parts of the world have corroborated—usually correspond with the territories of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities. (1) One of these areas is the Alto Turiaçu indigenous territory where the Ka'apor People live, which spans 530,524 hectares throughout six municipalities in the northwestern part of Maranhão state. It is home to a population of approximately 2,600 people in 20 communities. This is the largest indigenous territory of the Eastern Amazon, and also the largest portion of preserved rainforest in the region.

Caring for the territory: Who teaches whom?

The care of the forest, which academia and other social sectors call conservation, is based on—among other things—values and deep relationships with the territory; these include cultural, customary, spiritual and political values. Their traditional knowledge and practices have allowed them to simultaneously make use of and care for, the territory. These concepts and knowledge are not static; on the contrary, they evolve along with their cultures and adapt and respond to emerging needs. This is how the Ka'apor created, for example, monitoring and community-driven surveillance strategies.

The Ka'apor have faced many external threats. Over the years, invasions of their territory have increased, and even public officials have been implicated in assaults, the leasing of land, and the use of fake documents to misappropriate indigenous territory. Faced with this situation, a significant number of village leaders came together in 2012 and started to devise their own surveillance activities. They established small communities at the entrances of roads used by loggers, which they later called protection areas, or *ka'a usak ha* in their language. This was one of the successful experiences to neutralize aggression and invasion of their territory.

In September 2013, the Ka'apor created the first protected area in the municipality of Centro Novo do Maranhão, where, in December of the same year, they decided to bring back an organizational system called *Tuxa Ta Pame*, or Ka'apor Management Council. "It is a form of ancestral and collective organization of the people, which harkens back to and references the ancient *Tuxa*; these warriors left their mark on history for fighting and for giving their lives, for being masters of knowledge and culture, and for being strategists in the defense of their people and culture," members of the Council explained in an interview with WRM. In this system there are no bosses, chiefs, caciques or others in power; decisions are not made by a leader, but rather by the community, in groups and collectives. "Everyone is important and has a leading role in the defense [of the territory]. When there is an action of self-defense, the whole group goes. No one claims to direct others, but everyone who feels threatened shows up to the confrontation," they noted.

They also established the *Jupihu Katu Ha*, which is a Ka'apor agreement around coexistence. It was

created with the intention to support unity and exercise collective and responsible governance. The *Tuxa Ta Pame* is based on consensual, horizontal and participatory decisions.

It is necessary to highlight the relevance of these decisions in terms of autonomy and sovereignty. In having their own inclusive forms of government and organization—far removed from models such as representative democracy—the Ka'apor make space for the voices and direct participation of different sections of this indigenous group. One example of this is the Ka'apor self-defense guard, which is made up of families, women, elders, children, and even domesticated animals. Everyone has a responsibility and a task to carry out. In other words, everyone imagines, lives in, enjoys, appropriates and defends the territory.

Over time, and with the increase in attacks and threats, the Ka'apor have expanded their actions of territorial defense. They have implemented new forms of protection with community-driven surveillance and carried out a participatory process to map the Ka'apor biocultural ecosystems. They have even adopted and implemented a syntropic agroforestry system, an agricultural and productive system created a few decades ago that imitates the rainforest and its organization—in particular by reducing external inputs, and the accumulation and disposal of energy. This has all gone hand in hand with actions of solidarity related to education and health.

However, as community-driven surveillance has increased, so have assaults and murders—acts in which loggers, landowners, hunters, traders and local politicians have been involved. In the last ten years, more than 50 community members have been assaulted, two communities have been invaded, and there have been almost 15 murders.

Despite all of this, the forest the Ka'apor are taking care of is still largely intact. Recently, outsiders unfamiliar with the territory have arrived, allegedly to teach the Ka'apor how to do what they have done for centuries—protect their territory. They are advocating a REDD project. This raises the question of who actually needs to learn about having a relationship with the forest and caring for it? Have these outsiders really come with the intention of caring for the forest?

Arrival of the REDD proposal and anticipated impacts

In early 2023, the company Wildlife Works and the NGO Forest Trends, both from the United States, arrived in the Ka'apor territory with a proposal to implement a REDD project (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) that would generate and sell carbon credits. They arrived being introduced by indigenous people from the state of Pará,.

The *Ka'apor Ta Hury* Association of the Gurupi River is another organization in the territory. The association has a chief with whom the company and the NGO have established closer communication. This association, which does not represent all of the Ka'apor, says they are in agreement with the project. They say the project could improve their quality of life and provide resources to complement forest protection activities. Up to now, a memorandum of understanding has been signed. *Tuxa Ta Pame* denounces this document, because neither the company nor the NGO listened to them in the process that led to its signing.

As happens in many other territories around the world where the best-protected forests are found and fought over for carbon credit projects, indigenous peoples and communities are suffering the impacts. The mere arrival of a project announcement creates internal disputes and divisions.

The Ka'apor who oppose the REDD project proposal do so because it commodifies their way of life

and increases internal conflicts. They know this firsthand, as they already suffered a similar experience with a dry timber commercialization project that took place on their territory from 2006 to 2013. In that case, they felt deceived by those who involved them in the project—which included the state itself, the federal government, and even the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, by its Portuguese acronym). The commercialization project left conflict in its wake, as well as death and suffering, an experience which the Ka'apor do not wish to repeat. (2) Unfortunately, the current presence of outsiders and their proposed project is already causing conflict and deepened divisions among the Ka'apor.

Due to the tenor of the situation, a complaint has already been filed with the Federal Public Ministry (MPF, by its Portuguese acronym), an entity that has stated that any process that involves prior consultation must include dialogue with both groups, and that consensus must reflect a good outcome for both of them. (3)

When Beto Borges, a representative of Forest Trends, was asked about what the NGO's position would be if the Ka'apor did not reach consensus, he said that the project would not proceed—which demonstrates the importance of consensus in a decision of this magnitude. However, the response from the Wildlife Works representative, Lider Sucre, differs considerably, as he does not give relevance to consent. Instead, he emphasizes the decision of the collective: "There will never be complete unanimity. In a community process there are always different points of view. At the end of the process, we will abide by the decision of the collective, whether it is for or against". (4) However, this immediately raises the question: What does this corporate officer understand by the 'decision of the collective'? After all, part of the collective has already decided to reject the project.

In keeping with the *modus operandi* of organizations like theirs, Forest Trends and Wildlife Works have begun to disseminate biased information about REDD; meanwhile, there is very important information that they are not sharing. For example, they have not shared information with the Ka'apor about the irregularities, complaints and impacts of other REDD projects where Wildlife Works is involved, in Kenya, the DR Congo and Cambodia. (5)

In November 2023, The Guardian newspaper published a report (6) based on research carried out by the Kenya Human Rights Commission and the NGO SOMO (7), which documents allegations against Wildlife Works staff in the Kasigau project in Kenya. Senior company staff were accused of sexual abuse and harassment committed over more than a decade. Men associated with the company used their position to demand sex in exchange for promotions and better treatment. The investigation by a Kenyan law firm found evidence of "deeply inappropriate and harmful behavior" by two individuals.

The president of Wildlife Works himself, Mike Korchinsky, apologized for the pain this has caused and reported that three people had been suspended—stressing that this was not a generalized problem. It is worth noting that it this is a very common reaction to downplay the significance or extent of the abuse of this kind of project (8) and insist that they reported incidents are isolated cases.. However, the repetition of these events over time suggests that they are actually systemic in nature.

The fundamental problem behind these serious situations is that REDD projects are encouraged and promoted as an exclusively positive intervention for communities and territories, without mentioning the history of negative impacts. That is, essential information -complete, truthful and impartial- is hidden from people who are faced with making a decision about a project in their territory.

How has the *Tuxa Ta Pame* of the Ka'apor responded?

Once they identified the threat, *Tuxa Ta Pame* determined that it was necessary to seek more information that would allow them to comprehensively understand what the REDD mechanism is about, how it works, what it is based on, and what the implications for the population and territory would be.

After *Tuxa Ta Pame* began its own research process, external actors arrived to provide a simplistic and biased explanation about REDD and the generation of carbon credits to finance the project, which they claim would begin to provide benefits to people upon their mere signing of attendance sheets at meetings. However, members of the Ka'apor have been investigating, seeking other points of view, and most of all, learning about the experience of other communities that have a defined position on the matter. This is how they have reached their own conclusions.

The *Tuxa Ta Pame* council and the communities organized through it understand REDD to be "a camouflaged capitalist mechanism to keep the world polluted and threaten the autonomy of territories. Because it transfers responsibility from public to private power. Because it creates division and monetizes natural goods. We always defend the territory, because we believe it is our life. We never need to receive money in order to live and protect the forest". (9)

Based on that understanding of REDD, they decided to bring the topic into educational and training processes that take place in three training hubs which provide direction for five Ka'apor cultural and community education centers. The topic has become part of school and training activities, and they created bilingual primers about it. By the end of 2023, they had been carrying out training activities for seven months. This led to the initiative to create a Ka'apor autonomous community protocol which is currently under construction.

So, what is required for the forest to continue to exist?

It is necessary to guarantee conditions for the Ka'apor to remain in their territory in a safe and decent manner; this implies, among other things, respecting their own forms of political organization, decision-making and management of their territory and livelihoods. It must be stressed, once again, that REDD-type projects—which often cause conflict and impacts even before they get approved or implemented—are generally established in territories with a good state of protection, as in the case in Alto Turiaçu. It is the Ka'apor who have guaranteed these conditions, based on their knowledge, practices, relationship with and defense of the territory—without the need for outside projects or market mechanisms that limit or control what "should" be done, according to the people promoting these projects and mechanisms.

This article was prepared by the WRM Secretariat, based on interviews with members of the Ka'apor *Tuxa Ta Pame* Management Council.

(1) Porter-Bolland L. et al, 2012. Land use, cover change, deforestation, protected areas, community forestry, tenure rights, tropical forests. Forest ecology and management. Vol 268:6-17

(2) Video: [Intercept Brasil, Empresa americana alimenta conflito indígena para lucrar com reparação ambiental](#), 2023.

(3) Article: [Intercept Brasil, Empresa americana alimenta conflito indígena para lucrar com reparação ambiental](#), 2023.

(4) Idem 3

?(5) [REDD-Minus: the rethoric and reality of the Mai-N'dombe REDD+ Programme](#), 2020; [Fortress conservation in Wildlife Alliance's Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project: Evictions, violence, and burning people's homes](#). "We're proud of our work. The forest, the wildlife, you come to feel they're yours". 2021.

(6) The Guardian, [Allegations of extensive sexual abuse at Kenyan offsetting project used by Shell and Netflix](#), November 2023.

(7) SOMO, [Offsetting human rights. Sexual abuse and harassment at the Kasigau Corridor REDD+ Project in Kenya](#), November 2023.

(8) WRM, [15 Years of REDD: A mechanism Rotten at the Core](#), April 2022. .

(9) Interview with members of the Tuxa Ta Pame Ka'apor Management Council.