
[Brazil: Aracruz - Sustainability or business as usual?](#)

Six months ago, indigenous Tupinikim and Guarani people reclaimed just over 11,000 hectares of their land from the Brazilian pulp giant Aracruz Celulose. They chopped down thousands of eucalyptus trees to demarcate their territory and built two indigenous villages with a large meeting house and several other houses on the land. Several indigenous families are living in the houses.

Earlier this month, 300 Tupinikim and Guarani and their supporters occupied the central administration building of Aracruz's pulp mill complex for 30 hours, to protest against Aracruz's interference in the official recognition of their land rights.

Tupinikim and Guarani people have been attempting to recover their lands from Aracruz since 1979. In 1997, FUNAI recognised 18,071 hectares as belonging to the Tupinikim and Guarani people. However, they were only able to reclaim about 7,000 hectares of this land because of pressure from Aracruz on the federal government.

Aracruz Celulose started its plantation operations in the Brazilian state of Espírito Santo in 1967, during the military dictatorship which ruled Brazil from 1964 until 1985. "When the company came, the people left. They weren't able to defy it. They were forced to leave and even threatened," Eugenio Francisco, a Tupinikim of the village of Lancha told researchers from FUNAI, Brazil's indigenous affairs agency in 1994. "The company took everything," he said.

Aracruz built its first pulp mill on the site of a Tupinikim village called the Village of the Monkeys. Aracruz forced approximately 7,000 families to move from the land it occupied.

Today, Aracruz is the world's largest producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp. In 2004 the company produced 2.5 million tons of pulp, 97 per cent of which was exported. Aracruz's largest customers are Procter & Gamble and Kimberly Clarke, accounting for 45 per cent of the company's sales.

Aracruz owns 252,000 hectares eucalyptus plantations in the states of Minas Gerais, Bahia, Rio Grande do Sul and Espírito Santo. In addition, the company runs a "Forestry Partners Programme" covering 71,000 hectares of eucalyptus trees, managed and planted by farmers.

To make way for its plantations, Aracruz destroyed more than 50,000 hectares of Mata Atlântica forest. Pairs of tractors with a chain tied between them drove through the forest, destroying everything in their path. Animals were crushed by falling trees or machinery. Aracruz has also been fined by IBAMA, Brazil's environmental protection agency, for planting in protected areas.

Rivers and streams have dried up as a result of Aracruz's eucalyptus plantations. The company has dammed rivers and diverted water from the Doce River to its mills, further impacting water flows in the region. Fishing has largely disappeared from many of the rivers in the region.

In January 2004, in an attempt to improve its image, Aracruz hired a UK-based consulting firm called SustainAbility. SustainAbility was founded in 1987 by John Elkington, the author of such books as

"The Green Capitalists" and "The Green Business Guide". He describes his work over the last 25 years as "focusing mainly on trying to achieve sustainability with business, through markets."

SustainAbility is developing a Sustainability Plan for Aracruz. Jodie Thorpe of SustainAbility explained that SustainAbility "identified three areas of Aracruz's framework as initial priorities for improvement: stakeholder engagement, transparency and governance."

But SustainAbility's web-site includes very little information about Aracruz and nothing at all about Aracruz's record. It makes no mention of the Tupinikim and Guarani's struggle for land.

None of the reports that SustainAbility has produced are publicly available. "While we encourage and support transparency, I hope you can appreciate that we are not at liberty to share this work publicly," explained Thorpe.

Far from criticising Aracruz, SustainAbility's web-site states that "Aracruz Celulose has a long-standing commitment to sustainability."

I wrote to Elkington to ask him how he responds to the criticism that SustainAbility is helping to greenwash a controversial company. "That absolutely is not the intent" he replied. Elkington explained that the SustainAbility web-site refers to Aracruz's "clear corporate commitment" to sustainability. "In my mind," he wrote, "there is no question that Aracruz still has a huge amount of work to do before it can claim to be anything like a 'sustainable company'". On this last point, then, we agree.

I visited Aracruz in August 2001. I was there to take part in an international seminar on the impacts of eucalyptus plantations. Aracruz was also invited. I was looking forward to hearing how Aracruz staff would respond when faced with hundreds of community members who live with the impacts caused by the company. Aracruz, however, declined to attend the seminar.

While I was there, I visited Tupinikim and Guarani villages, and listened to the problems they had faced since Aracruz had taken over their land. I saw the vast areas of sterile, industrial eucalyptus plantations. A Tupinikim village I visited was surrounded by plantations. I saw Aracruz's massive, stinking pulp mill. I heard about how the company releases its waste water at night. And I took part in a march with hundreds of people through Espírito Santo to protest against Aracruz's activities.

A few years ago, Elkington wrote that "Much of what passes for sustainable development looks very much like business more or less as usual." Elkington's consulting firm, SustainAbility, it seems, is currently proving this statement to be true.

By Chris Lang, E-mail: <http://chrislang.org>