
Brazil: Monte Pascoal National Park belongs to the Pataxo

When the European conquerors arrived in America, they made a clear distinction between white people, black people and indians. While the former were human beings, the African slaves were declared animals. Although the indians were declared human beings, they were considered as children, whose lives needed to be governed by adults, who were those of European descent.

No-one will now openly support the above distinctions, but in fact that kind of thinking is far from dead. The case of the Pataxo indigenous peoples in the state of Bahia in Brazil constitutes one of many possible examples. Their territory was completely taken over in 1951 -following the physical massacre of most of their people- and a large part of it was declared a National Park, while the rest was distributed to cattle ranchers. On August 19, 1999, the Pataxo decided to recover their traditional lands and took over Monte Pascoal National Park (see WRM Bulletin 26). The reaction of Brazilian society has been mixed. Some relatively few organizations and individuals expressed their unconditional support to this action, based on the simple fact that the Pataxo are the righteous owners of the park. A larger part of the population chose to either oppose, or ignore, or conditionally support the action. The explanation can be found in the deep racism still prevailing as regards to indigenous peoples. Even some organizations sympathetic to indigenous peoples' issues seem to mistrust the Pataxo's capacity to conserve the park. Apparently the park's conservation is to them more important than justice. More importantly, they seem to continue regarding the Pataxo as children which need to be guided by adults. Is this not racism?

In a forest-destroying country as Brazil, no-one can blame the indigenous peoples of having been major actors in such scenario. On the contrary, they have been at the receiving end, having had their lives and livelihoods gravely affected by deforestation and forest degradation. The fact that Monte Pascoal -part of the Pataxo's territory- still had extensive forest when it was declared a National Park is proof of the above. But many are concerned that in the "indians'" hands the Park may now be destroyed. This needs some clarification. On the one hand, it must be stated that the Pataxo -the righteous owners of the land- have the same legal rights that other Brazilians have of logging the forest. On the other hand, that the Pataxo have declared that their aim is to conserve the forest and there's no reason to believe that they will not act in accordance with such statement.

Monte Pascoal National Park means much to the Pataxo: it means the recovery of their ancestral territory and the possibility of regaining their dignity as a people. The Park also means much to conservationists, which see it as one of the few remnants of the almost entirely destroyed Mata Atlantica forest. At the same time, the Park is also a symbol of the "discovery" of Brazil by the Portuguese 500 years ago. The Pataxo have therefore put on the table crucial issues to be addressed by the entire Brazilian society: justice; equality between indigenous and other peoples; conservation and people; "discovery", encounter or conquest; racism; genocide.

The Pataxo will need much support at the international, national and local levels. They are facing a large number of forces that will work to defeat them using all available means. As an example, the government has recently stopped funding its own agency's working group, which had been assigned the task of demarcating the Pataxo's territory. It has given lands to landless peasants within the

Pataxo's territory, with the aim of generating conflicts between the two groups. The cattle ranchers surrounding the area are responsible for annual fires which will almost inevitably affect the park -as they have done in the past. The government may decide not to provide support to suppress the fires, to show the inability of the Pataxo to preserve the forest.

This is not a conservation versus destruction issue. It's a matter of repairing injustice and recognizing the Pataxo's right to manage their territory. They call on organizations, the Church, parliamentarians, municipal, state and federal bodies and concerned individuals to help them "build the future of our people within our traditional territory ... which is the only possible place for building our future with dignity." All those wishing to support the Pataxo's struggle can contact them through CIMI-Equipe Extremo Sul