
Brazil: The Impacts of Nature-based Exclusions on Women's Bodies-Territories

This text shares reflections that emerged from our discussions with women impacted by Green Economy projects in Brazil. In order to understand these women's forms of struggle, one must first recognize their knowledge and ways of relating to nature. It is through this recognition that we build our alternatives and routes out of the maze.

The new so-called 'Nature-based Solutions' has the same logic of the old false solutions based on the market and the Green Economy. In this text we seek to share reflections that emerged from our discussions with women impacted by Green Economy projects in the Ribeira River Valley (in the southeast region of Brazil, between the states of São Paulo and Paraná) and in Acre (a state in the northern region of the country). In order to understand these women's forms of struggle, one must first recognize their knowledge and ways of relating to nature. It is through this recognition that we departure ourselves from analysis to practice, and build our alternatives and routes out of the maze.

The experiences of indigenous women from Acre, where there have been consolidated REDD+ projects since 2012 (1), demonstrate very well the contradictions and tensions brought upon the territory by the arrival of the Green Economy. They are not informed about the terms of the programs that arrive in their territories – with difficult terminology and contracts often written in English – and have no place at the bargaining table, since the large-scale organizations that bring these projects only discuss the matter with the men. In the rare occasions when the women take part, they need to make twice the effort and take their children along to meetings, and when they get there they are not heard or taken into consideration. As well as not having a voice in these processes, the women also demonstrate that the logic of their relation with nature is incompatible with conservation projects. During an exchange about this question organized by the WRM in partnership with the Indigenist Missionary Council (Conselho Indigenista Missionário – CIMI) and Sempreviva Feminist Organization (Sempreviva Organização Feminista – SOF) in 2019, they demonstrated a very good understanding of the logic behind these projects, by observing how they got to their communities.

One of the participants explained that the matching measures offered by the projects are actions with no relation with the communities' way of life, and that often serve only to insert them in the capitalist market circuit and to concentrate income, thus disrespecting traditional ways of living. She gave as an example a project that offered the construction of small dams to create fish farms in the community. In criticizing the proposal, she alluded to the importance of keeping alive in the community the idea that life depends on the river that runs through their land, if for no other reason so that people continue to protect it and not to allow the entry of megaprojects that privatize water in the region.

Upon returning to their community, the small-scale female farmers of the Ribeira River Valley who participated in this meeting explained what they had learned, i.e., the logic of compensation. "It is as if they were funding a person here, for things to be beautiful here, for them to be able to destroy everything over there," concluded one of the *quilombolas*. "We have to think about where our money comes from, how this limits our way of working, and whether this is causing harm somewhere else."

The women who take care of the forests are either invisibilized or considered service providers within the same logic of what happens with nature. Their very bodies become appropriated nature. As reported by thinker Ana Isla (2), during the 1990s, while Costa Rica constituted itself as a paradise of conservation and ecotourism, more and more land was being fenced off, communities expelled, and women and girls sexually exploited. Their commitment to care is instrumentalized in the form of services that start to be supported because they potentialize nature's services.

More recently, the large-scale organizations that promote this kind of project have been introducing this new term 'Nature-based Solutions' to encompass the old compensation projects. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is an example, among others. Strictly speaking, this organization is an NGO, but it is similar to major transnational corporations in the way in which it exploits communities in various parts of the world. It is important to highlight the fact that in Brazil we witness both the advance of the brown economy (represented by mining, agribusiness and megaprojects) and of the Green Economy, promoted by organizations like TNC. Our reading is that the two are no different in nature. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin: the more destruction advances, the greater the field opened up to compensation initiatives. The more nature becomes scarce, the higher the value of the green bonds that trade it according to the law of supply and demand. In this equation, communities' territories and common goods enter the financial markets as collateral for these bonds, and become mere assets.

We draw special attention to TNC's actions in Brazil vis-à-vis the dissemination and control of the Rural Environmental Registry (Cadastro Ambiental Rural – CAR). The New Forest Law of 2012 instituted the CAR as one of its mechanisms. Since then, by law the country's rural territories need to be geo-referenced and registered in the National System of the Rural Environmental Registry (Sistema Nacional do Cadastro Ambiental Rural – SiCAR). The new legislation also instituted the Environmental Regularization Program (Programa de Regularização Ambiental – PRA) and the Environmental Reserve Quota (Cota de Reserva Ambiental – CRA). These actions feed into a single process: permitting environmental compensation and placing conserved areas on the market.

Through projects that take place mainly in the states of Pará (Amazon biome) and Mato Grosso (Cerrado biome), TNC has sought to accelerate farmers' registration at all costs. It has even gone so far as to make available its own system, called CARGEO, for states that wish to use it to gather information and register it on SiCAR. By means of partnerships with governments, it offers services like geo-referencing by sweeping rural properties and production of geo-referenced municipal digital databases (3). This represents the power of this organization over data belonging to communities and public bodies. It also contributes to the insertion of more and more protected areas into the compensation market.

Purplewashing

At the same time, TNC carries out actions that we call purplewashing. Based on the reports of women from communities affected by conservation projects, we have seen that in practice they bring neither justice nor autonomy. Despite this, the gender agenda is present in several of TNC's actions and statements. In an attempt to display a supposed social responsibility, women are placed at the center of projects, as the main beneficiaries. Training courses are organized and women's groups are formed in the communities. However, the main actions of the organization continue to be the promotion of models of relations with nature that in and of themselves are patriarchal and excluding. A paradigmatic example of this is the training cycle on mining that TNC developed mainly for women on the Salomon Islands (4). The starting point is that the problem is a lack of information among women, rather than extractivism itself – as if having information about destruction were enough to

stop it. The organization's policy toward women is all about placing them within market-based solutions (5), and not about withdrawing the market from the center of one's life.

The women farmers, *quilombolas* and *caiçaras* with whom we interact in the Ribeira River Valley are constantly managing the forests where they live. Each time they walk among their plants, even if this is not the initial intention, they pull out dead leaves, bring stalks closer to the soil to generate roots, bury seeds and plant seedlings, combining them with enormous diversity. They know every square meter of their land – and an attentive observer does not fail to notice their interventions/interactions in each one. In areas near their homes, the management of organic matter is common to many farmers, who produce rich and structured soils.

Their relation with nature, their painstaking work, is opposed to conservation and restoration practices centered on a single species and on economies of scale, for these follow the same rationale of industrial agriculture (single species value chain, scale and absence of people).

One example is a tree known in Brazil as *Caixeta* (*Tabebuia cassinoides*), which grows in flood-prone areas along the coastal strip of the Atlantic Forest. Its seeds are wind-dispersed, and it develops sprouts from its roots. Its wood is used by *caiçara* communities in the production of crafts and musical instruments, like the *viola* (a ten-string guitar-like instrument) and a traditional type of violin known as *rabeca do fandango*. The *fandango* is a tradition among these communities of the Ribeira River Valley: dancing and music originally practiced after collective work tasks were concluded. But this kind of wood also had intensive industrial use to produce pencils and toothpicks. Together with this intensive use came the destruction of its ecosystem due to the silting up of rivers, to alterations in the water regime owing to dam construction and to increased construction of luxury condos along the shore. *Caixeta* extraction was banned in 1989, but pressure from *caiçara* communities led the São Paulo state government to establish in 1992 that its exploration would depend on permission from the state Department of the Environment. In the mid-2000s, a group of women came together in the Juréia Young People's Association to produce crafts in *Caixeta* wood with designs of flowers, plants and animals of the Atlantic Forest. These were well received wherever they were offered. However, the initiative had to be suspended because the state Department of the Environment did not authorize the craftswomen to extract *Caixeta* wood. The delay and even the lack of authorization are very likely to relate to the persecution of the Rio Verde community. This is a community that insists on and renews its presence in its territory, through the building of homes for its young people. The territory is understood by the state government as an 'Ecological Station', an area of very restricted use that implies the expulsion and permanent persecution of its community (6).

It is also worth highlighting the case of *Juçara* (*Euterpe edulis*). This medium-sized palm tree grows in the Atlantic Forest in humid and shaded places, and ends up standing out above the canopy of other trees. It does not reproduce by sprouting, just via seeds that are mostly dispersed over a small distance. *Juçara* is under threat owing to the destruction of the Atlantic Forest. It is also estimated that climate change and the extinction of the birds that disperse its seeds will affect the genetic variability and existence of the species. However, the major concern of environmental agencies centers on its illegal extraction for consumption of the *Juçara* palm heart. The extraction of the *Juçara* palm heart is an environmental crime, the penalty for which may reach one year of incarceration. This has been a focus of tension in the relation between public bodies, including the environmental police, and communities. Even though managed extraction by traditional communities is allowed, the process is very bureaucratic and 'misunderstandings' are always a risk. Gradually, *palmiteiro* (palm heart extractor) has become a specialized occupation and, because it is a criminal one, has become associated to the dynamic of other criminal businesses (drug trafficking, child prostitution) and to police corruption.

Recently, the Forestry Foundation, an agency of the state Infrastructure and Environment Department, dropped *Juçara* seeds from a helicopter on a *quilombola* territory, considered a reservation by the state. The program in question (7) talks about tons of seeds, thousands of hectares, and hopes to replace the helicopter with drones. It is as if the good intention of repopulating the area with *Juçara* justified that each square meter painstakingly cared for by the *quilombolas* should be 'rained on' with something like a blessing provided by technicians who hold more knowledge and power than them. The drones further deepen the sense of technology without people; the 'rain' further deepens the sense of a territory without a community, a reservation.

It is based on these examples that the term 'Nature-based Solutions' should actually be 'Nature-based *Exclusions*' in order to represent this form of dealing with nature. Women and all of their knowledge, traditional communities, ways of relating to nature not governed by profit and exploitation, all the different ways of inhabiting the earth, of understanding it, of symbolizing it – all of this is excluded. We are left with extractivism, the advance of capital over the commons, and the mentality that nature – like women – is a being that serves only to carry out services that sustain exploitation.

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- (1) WRM Bulletin, [Deforestation in the Amazon, and the REDD+ Money that Keeps Coming to Brazil](#), 2020.
- (2) [Economia feminista e ecológica: resistências e retomadas de corpos e territórios](#). Ana Isla, Miriam Nobre, Renata Moreno, Sheyla Saori Iyusuka, Yayo Herrero. São Paulo: SOF Sempre Viva Organização Feminista, 2020.
- (3) The Nature Conservancy, [CADASTRO AMBIENTAL RURAL - CAR. Nasce a Identidade do Imóvel Rural](#). 2015.
- (4) The Nature Conservancy, [Mining and Gender Inclusion](#).
- (5) The Nature Conservancy, [Women in Conservation](#).
- (6) For more information about the conflict that threatens the Rio Verde *caçara* community, [see here](#).
- (7) CicloVivo, [Uma tonelada de sementes é lançada em reserva](#), 2020.