

# RISE OF THE RUBBER TAPPERS

*As clear-cutters and cattle ranchers eye Brazil's unspoiled jungle, the seringueiros are fighting back*

Story and photographs by Randall Hyman

**R**UBBER TREES have the deepest roots of all the forest's trees," Chico Mendes says, as he carves a gash in the corky bark of a towering *seringueira*. Like white blood, the tree's latex sap begins oozing from the wound, trickling into the tin cup Mendes has jammed into the bark.

The cup is missing from the next tree down the trail. "A monkey probably carried it away," Mendes explains with a chuckle. "They're always doing that." Lowering his voice, he adds, "Sometimes a jaguar will come during the night and crush a few cups with her teeth, to remind us she's there."

Not that Mendes, a Brazilian rubber tapper, or *seringueiro*, needs to be reminded of the presence of jaguars. Like the rubber tree, he has deep roots in the jungle, and he knows its dangers. And like the jaguar, Mendes long ago began letting the world know he was there. That is why men tried to kill him.

Mendes's enemies are all those who would strip away Brazil's forests in the name of progress, thereby uprooting the estimated half a million people who make a living by gathering raw materials such as latex and Brazil nuts. Among his allies are North American conservation groups, including the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), which have helped parlay his cause into an unprecedented about-face by international bankers.

Mendes's story, and that of other rubber tappers, is a tale of grass roots activism against enormous and deadly odds, of a conservation movement led by people for whom jungle preservation is a matter of survival. The movement's message—that an intact rain forest may be the most eco-



**Rubber tapper Chico Mendes (above) notches a well-worked tree that oozes valuable latex (right). Also a union organizer, Mendes has led a bitter battle to save his people's way of life—and Brazil's jungle. The outcome is changing the way banks make Third World loans.**

nomically viable rain forest—has been argued by rubber tapper leaders on Brazilian TV talk-shows and at international meetings. But before the sessions in conference halls came confrontations in the jungle, less formal affairs where machetes were more in evidence than microphones.

The first of those forest meetings oc-

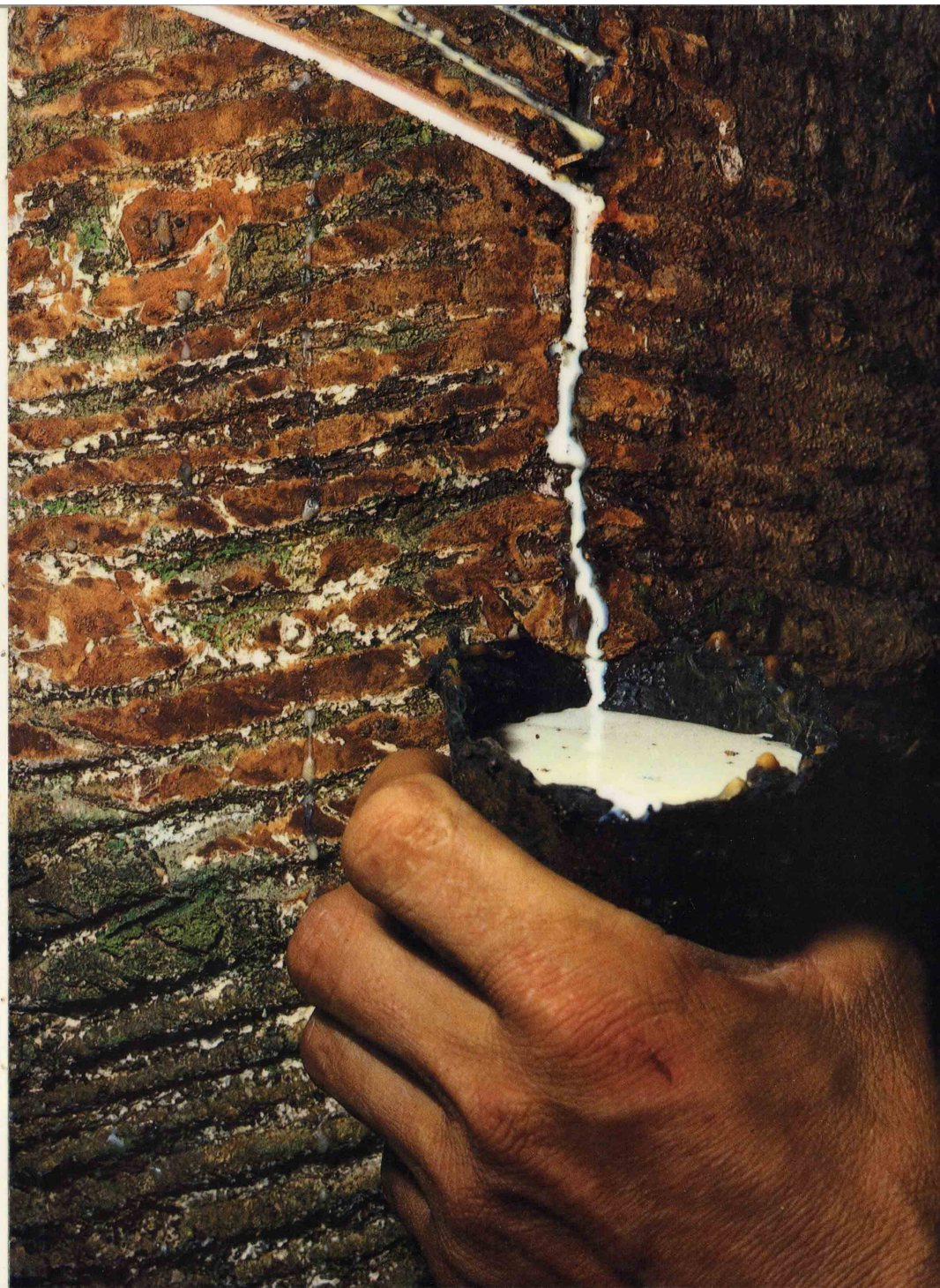
curred on a June night 11 years ago. One hundred loggers were sleeping in their hammocks when angry shouts ripped through the rain forest. Carrying hunting rifles and machetes, Chico Mendes and 128 rubber tappers confronted the men who had been hired to fell a forest. The loggers fled, foiling a local rancher's plan to increase his cattle pasture. After generations of muteness, *seringueiros* had found their voice.

But when news reached town, ranchers demanded action. Federal Police agents arrested and interrogated Mendes. Released, he organized more confrontations with loggers. In December 1979, four masked gunmen abducted Mendes from Rio Branco, capital of Brazil's westernmost state of Acre. Later that night they dumped his beaten and tortured body on a deserted road. Undaunted, Mendes continued organizing rubber tappers.

The next year, ranchers contracted for the murder of Mendes and of another *seringueiro* leader, Wilson Pinheiro. Pinheiro was gunned down on the steps of the rubber-tapper union headquarters. Mendes, away that day, escaped death.

"The ranchers killed Wilson in order to destabilize our movement," says Mendes, looking back on a decade of dangerous opposition to Acre's status quo. "And it worked because back then union leaders had no outside support." But now the rubber tappers have international support. For Mendes, at least, the recognition has paid off in strange ways. "My old 'friends' at the Federal Police finally gave me a license to carry this," he notes, displaying the shiny new .38 revolver he now keeps.

Mendes and his family live in a jungle







From milky sap to crude rubber, the substance that helps give bounce to airplane tires and stretch to latex gloves takes shape in the jungle. In Acre, a rubber tapper's son (left) pours freshly tapped latex into a huge bowl. Traditionally, the latex

is next ladled onto a log roller (below), then rotated in a plume of curing smoke. In a new method—one that eliminates middlemen and provides more profit to tappers—slabs of treated latex are pressed through a hand-cranked roller (bottom), then dried in a smokehouse.



clearing just large enough for their wooden shack, a small garden plot and a few head of livestock. He and his in-laws work an area of forest consisting of about 1,000 acres. Through it, three trails provide access to about 600 rubber trees.

The latex collected in one year by a family like Mendes's yields about 1,300 pounds of jungle-processed rubber. The rubber is sold to traveling middlemen and ultimately shipped to Brazil's industrial cities. The family's earnings, with income from gathering Brazil nuts, amounts to no more than a thousand or so dollars—but enough to get by in Acre's countryside.

For less fortunate rubber tappers, life has changed little since their forefathers migrated to Acre at the turn of the century. In those boom years, when Henry Ford's new mass-produced autos created an insatiable demand for tire rubber, peasants from Brazil's drought-plagued northeast poured into the Amazon to tap latex. But instead of wealth, the tappers found misery. Local rubber barons exploited the immigrants; many found themselves marooned on the vast jungle rubber estates called *seringueais*.

Brazil's rubber boom collapsed from foreign competition around 1920, then bounced back in World War II, when some 50,000 so-called "soldiers of rubber" tapped trees for the Allied cause. After the war—as with the earlier boom—many tappers remained stranded on estates.

For autonomous *seringueiros* like Mendes, life is better. Since the early 1960s many tappers have shed the bondage of the old days, refusing to pay rent to absentee landlords. But most of those landlords have since sold their estates to ranchers from southern Brazil. With that, rubber tappers faced new problems: clearing-cutting and mass evictions.

So far, ranchers have clear-cut more than one million acres—about 3 percent—of Acre's forest. Some 40,000 rubber tappers and 10,000 Indians in Acre stand to lose their jungle homes and livelihoods if the vision of men like rancher Joao Batista Tezza Filho prevails.

"Of course, we must leave some of Acre's forests uncut," allows Tezza, an energetic cattleman and lawyer who holds a seat in Acre's state legislature. "I'd say maybe 25 percent of our trees should be left standing," he says, while surveying his pasture filled with white Nellore cattle.

In the neighboring state of Rondonia, that kind of cut-the-jungle vision has brought disaster. Ranchers and farmers there have mown down or disturbed 35 percent of the state's forests. In their wake



they have left millions of acres of wasteland—abandoned fields that briefly bore crops or grass before exhausting soil nutrients. “On most soils in the Amazon you get one head of cattle per hectare [2.47 acres] the first five years, maybe a quarter of that for another two years, and then in a lot of cases you get moonscape,” says Stephan Schwartzman, a scientist with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) who has studied the economics of various land uses in the Amazon.

In Acre, clear-cutting to create cattle pasture has been concentrated on ranches near main highways, most of which are still dirt roads. But the situation is changing. Brazil’s government wants desperately to open up Acre to farmers from crowded Rondonia, and a \$60-million highway project is considered one of the best avenues for development: paving the dirt Highway BR364 is expected to usher in a flood of colonists.

Nearly half the money for the jungle highway project has come from an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loan to Brazil. The IDB is one of the world’s four big lending institutions for Third World projects. Much of its funding comes from the United States. Thanks to heavy pressure on the bank from U.S. conservation groups, about \$10 million of the highway loan money was allocated to guard against adverse environmental effects of road construction, and to help create reserves for jungle Indians.

Yet while the road project has rolled forward, most of that environmental protection money has remained unspent—much to the dismay of the conservationists. To focus attention on the need for environmental safeguards, the Federation and EDF brought Chico Mendes to Miami to lobby bank directors. And EDF’s Stephan Schwartzman and other witnesses testified before the United States Senate’s Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee. When committee members warned the bank that it faced a cutoff of U.S. funding, it suspended the Brazilian highway loan—the first time the bank has stopped a loan on the basis of environ-



**Hungry for land, a Brazilian colonist hoists his chain saw in a jungle clearcut. In the back curves Highway BR364, the road project that will funnel more tree cutters into rubber tappers’ forests.**

mental concerns in one of its projects.

Nonetheless, modernization of Highway BR364 continues. The project is already half completed. With time running out and conflicts between Acre’s rubber tappers and colonists sure to increase, there is only one ray of hope for Mendes and his colleagues—an unusual development concept called extractive reserves.

Large tracts of jungle set aside for the harvest of latex, Brazil nuts, palm nuts and other wild products, extractive reserves would exploit Acre’s forest without destroying it. The concept, developed at a rubber tappers’ meeting a few years ago, offers a solid economic reason to preserve the jungle. In fact, it is estimated that

Acreans already earn twice as much money per hectare harvesting rubber as they do from ranching cattle.

The extractive reserve idea has been embraced by U.S. conservationists and—as of the spring of 1988—by Brazil’s government. In response to the unprecedented IDB suspension, Brazil recently responded with a proposal to restart the highway loan on the basis of several changes in the project. These include a promise to demarcate 32 Indian areas in the states of Acre and Amazonas. The government has also offered to protect an additional half million hectares of jungle potentially affected by the highway. Most important to rubber tappers, however, was the government’s proposal to create four extractive reserves (three of them in Acre) totaling about 518,000 hectares.

For rubber tappers it was welcome news. If the four reserves and others like them are indeed established, prospects for safeguarding a significant portion of Acre’s forest—and a way of life for *seringueiros*—are improved.

For the conservationists that nudged IDB into making good on a loan recipient’s

promises, the prospect of extractive reserves represents proof that the banking community is accepting the idea that conservation and development are two sides of the same coin. “We’re talking economics,” says Barbara Bramble, director of international programs at the NWE. “We’re trying to get people to start with the environment when they design a development strategy, instead of having an idea and then looking at the consequences.”

Her sentiments are shared by *seringueiros*. As one rubber tapper leader told his colleagues at a conference in Brasilia, “We’re not against development, but we are against the devastation of Amazonia. We want development that doesn’t only benefit the big companies and the powerful, but the people that work the land.” ■

*A frequent visitor to Brazil, photographer/writer Randall Hyman has contributed to previous International Wildlife articles on piranhas, tamarins and jungle reforestation.*