

Conclusion

The rubber tappers have told different stories, but each one contains several recurring themes. Perhaps the most surprising, considering the isolation in which seringueiros have lived until recently, is the sharp awareness of how local events form part of the global picture. Seringueiros see their situation as connected to the larger world.

We also observe in the tappers a clear grasp of the importance of political power. Their political consciousness was raised over a very short period of time, as workers quickly learned, for example, that only those with political power can call out the police. Seringueiros have organized, formed alliances, and learned to work within a political party.

Forest workers know that it is suicide to destroy the forest on which they depend. A keen awareness of their dependence on the environment pervades nearly every interview and has been heightened in recent years by the seringueiros' association with numerous environmental groups.

Partly as a result of their view of nature as a web that supports and connects all life, the seringueiros hold a different view of property rights than do the fazendeiros or loggers. For the tappers, individual ownership is not the important thing. What is essential are use rights which allow them access to resources, not in order to amass wealth but to earn a living. The right of usufruct [use] was the land arrangement the seringueiros requested when proposing the extractive reserves.

Seringueiros by no means wish to turn their backs on the modern world. On the contrary, as we have seen, they ardently desire the health benefits, social services, basic infrastructure, and education for their children that are features of modern life everywhere. Nor do they seek isolation from the global market, but entry on their own terms, and not at the cost of economic and cultural extinction.

The seringueiros believe that viable alternatives can be found that will enable them to live sustainably and remain in the forest. A number of NGOs are providing valuable assistance with research projects and pilot programs in economic diversification.

The NGOs, however, have not built in a vacuum, but on solid community efforts first undertaken by dynamic, effective local leaders, such as Wilson