

The Hidden Agriculture of the Amazon Forest

The image of agriculture in the Amazon is often shaped by colonisation fronts encroaching on the forest. But other forms of agriculture such as those practised by Amerindian peoples and traditional populations can help preserve the forest cover, subject to a long fallow cycle.



Cassava tubers and cuttings, Río Negro, Brazil.

The cultural diversity of the Brazilian Amazon, where more than 200 languages are spoken, also encompasses a huge diversity of agricultural systems with different practices, knowledge, cultivated plants and resulting food systems. Many plants such as cassava, yams, achiote, sweet potatoes, which now form an integral part of the nation's eating habits, are the result of domestication, selection and conservation processes conducted over the centuries by Amerindian populations. These populations' contribution to the variety of cultivated plants is still too often unrecognised, particularly by public authorities, while at the same time the advance of colonisation fronts, increasing urbanisation and new dietary habits are threatening the existence of these local agricultural systems, and therefore related biological resources.

A first step was taken in recognising the importance of these forms of agriculture in 2010, with the inclusion of the Rio Negro traditional agricultural system in Brazil's cultural Heritage. This inclusion, resulting from interactions between Amerindian associations, Brazilian and French researchers and non-governmental organisations, gave national exposure to local production methods and the tremendous range of plant genetic resources managed in agricultural systems which are all too often considered to be archaic. This

... Research highlights the symbiotic relationship between humans and the Amazon rainforest ...



Felled trees, an area rich in cultivated plants, Rio Negro, Brazil.

variety of resources, for example dozens of varieties of cassava in a single pile of felled trees, stems from the expert knowledge of women farmers, practices focusing on diversity and the dissemination thereof through ongoing exchanges on the scale of the Rio Negro basin. Other elements including the famously fertile dark earth, the distribution of useful species such as the Brazil nut, cacao or others illustrate the Amazon forest's rich cultivation history. In this era of ecological transition, it is essential that we understand the foundations of these sustainable agricultural systems while ensuring their continuity and adjustment to new socio-economic and ecological demands.

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