Rubber tapper citizens: emerging places, policies, and shifting rural-urban identities in Acre, Brazil

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In the 1970s and 1980s, a strong social movement of rubber tappers in the Amazonian state of Acre achieved remarkable policy goals, gaining new forms of land rights as well as political representation through their alliance with indigenous groups, environmentalists, political parties and human rights advocates. Allies of the social movement entered politics and took state power in 1999 as the "Forest Government," building on the rubber tapper's legacy to embrace the unique cultural and political history of the state, and implementing ambitious plans for forest-based development under the banner of "forest citizenship." In the past 25 years, however, rubber tapper identity has changed rapidly as many rubber tappers migrate to urban areas, or increasingly shift from traditional rubber tapping to more intensive land uses such as commercial agriculture and small-scale animal husbandry. This paper uses data collected from household surveys, key-informant interviews and ethnographic research to explore the idea of what it means to be a "rubber tapper" and "forest citizen" today. We examine the contradictory nature of changing land-use and cultural revitalization efforts among diverse rural and urban populations, and the implications of this diversity for the future of the Forest Government's policies, and the rubber tappers.

Keywords: rubber tappers; identity; place; Amazon; Acre; Brazil

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, rubber tappers in the western Amazonian state of Acre achieved the status of environmental icons, and secured remarkable policy goals. Specifically, they gained new forms of land rights as well as political representation, through their alliance with indigenous groups, environmentalists, political parties, and human rights advocates. Close

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allies of the social movement entered politics and took state power in 1999 as the "Forest Government," building on the rubber tappers' legacy to embrace the unique cultural and political history of the state, and implementing plans for "green" forest-based development to benefit rural communities. In the past 25 years, life for rubber tappers has shifted dramatically as many migrate to urban areas, where they have constructed a city life less strongly rooted in the rubber tapper past. Meanwhile, those who stay in the interior increasingly move away from traditional practices such as non-timber forest product (NTFP) extraction to more intensive land uses such as commercial agriculture and small-scale animal husbandry (Ehringhaus 2005), incorporating urban influences—and even urban second homes—into their evolving lifestyles. As the practices of many rubber tappers have shifted and diversified, their previous identities, rooted in the cultural history of the rubber tapping estates and their successful struggles for land rights, have been reshaped. As a result, rubber tapper and forest identities are increasingly complex and fractured.

The principal achievement of the rubber tappers' movement in the early 1990s was the creation of a novel land reform instrument called the extractive reserve, that grants long-term collective use rights over forested areas to local "extractivist" populations who earn their livelihoods primarily from the extraction of NTFPs from native forests. Since this initial success, Brazilian government agencies have created 67 federal and state extractive reserves in the Brazilian Amazon, spanning nearly 14 million hectares (Gomes 2009). Voters in Acre, elected the Forest Government to three consecutive terms based on its discourses and policies which were reminiscent of the rubber tappers' movement supporting innovative forest development in the state. Moreover, Marina Silva, a former rubber tapper, first served as Brazilian Minister of the Environment from 2003–2008 and, though not elected, successfully brought the green development platform into her electoral campaign for the Brazilian presidency in 2010.

Despite overall support for a continued investment in extractive reserves, green development, and other "working forests"—those intended for sustainable use rather than strict preservation (Zarin *et al.* 2004)—some scholars question the viability of extractivism in terms of its economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Fearnside 1989; Hecht and Cockburn 1990; Murrieta and Rueda 1995). Many argue that non-timber forest extractivism will not alleviate poverty in the long run, and that when a commodity becomes economically important, it is likely to transform into a commercial or large-scale operation (Browder 1990; Homma 1992).

Facing such uncertainties regarding the extractive reserve proposal, Acre's Forest Government undertook ambitious policies to reverse the tendencies towards land-use change, deforestation, and rural-to-urban migration that threatened to undermine the historical basis of the state's economy and society. These proposals were encapsulated in the new term

Florestania, coined to capture the notion of citizenship based in the forest.[1] The state endeavored to recuperate for the state's residents—both rural and urban—a new sense of identity that would celebrate the population's roots in the rubber tapping economy, while breaking from the previous development models to favor environmentally-friendly policies. *Florestania*, was one of the flagships of the new Amazonian "socio-environmental frontier" (B. Becker 2004, pp. 139–158), a uniquely integrated approach to environmental conservation and support for the rights of local peoples that emerged in Brazil in the 1990s from an alliance of environmentalists, local populations and social movements. The Forest Government policies sought to raise the self-esteem of the forest dwelling population, stigmatized because of their poverty and illiteracy, while also drawing urban dwellers into a new *acriano*[2] identity that encompassed social justice and citizenship rights; ethics, transparency and participation in government; pride in Acre and its symbols (Figure 1); conservation of forest resources; and sustainable development—both rural and urban—constructed from the local cultural and ecological history (B. Becker 2004, p. 139; de Sant'Ana Júnior 2004).

While the debate continues surrounding the sustainability of the extractive reserve system and working forests, few published studies have analyzed the rapid changes underway in Acre, in terms of land-use and social identities. Chief among these are widespread shifts in livelihood practices in the extractive reserves, the weakening of the rubber tappers' social movement, and the ascendancy of state-wide sustainable development policies in both rural and urban areas. The historical ties and

Figure 1. The Forest Library in Rio Branco. Note the Acre State Forest Government logo, the outline of a Brazil nut tree, symbolic of *Florestania* (on left). Photograph by Elliott Reid.

current links between rural and urban places and populations have been particularly overlooked, despite their importance for the future of the state's development proposals.

This paper focuses on issues of identity and place to explore the contradictory nature of changing land-use and cultural revitalization efforts in Acre among diverse rural and urban populations, emphasizing their changing practices, political history, and attachment to place. Specifically, we ask: (1) How has the identity of rubber tappers and their social movement evolved with changes in livelihood practices, specifically the decline of rubber in favor of other activities? (2) What new forms of identity have emerged with the Forest Government's sustainable development initiatives in rural and urban areas? (3) How are these changing identities linked to shifting rural and urban landscapes in Acre?

In order to explore these evolving concepts of identity, place, and environmental politics among the iconic rubber tappers of Acre, in the sections that follow we use a hybrid framework based on the role of place and identity construction in cultural geography, as well as environmental identities in political ecology. First, we discuss the research methodology and provide background on the study area. Second, we explore the evolution of rubber tapper identity with respect to livelihood practices, participation in the social movement, and sense of place. Third, we shift scales, focusing on the broader implications of the rubber tappers' movement—the rise of the forest government, the development of forest policy and the emerging concept of "forest citizenship" among urban populations. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of recognizing changing rainforest identities as a realistic basis for future sustainability in the region.

The role of place and identity construction

Much of cultural geography explores the relationship between place, culture, and identity. Tuan (1974, p. 93) calls the human attachment to place, *topophilia*, a "human being's affective ties with the material environment." Places, and the material landscapes they encompass, may have a bio-physical reality but are also constructed and interpreted differently by an individual or group based on past, present and future desires and experiences. A cultural landscape can be seen as "a repository of meanings" based on lived experiences, mundane everyday activities, livelihood practices, societal aspirations, personal attachments, time, and culture, among other things (Tuan 1974, p. 145; Nash 2000; Batterbury 2001). Consequently, landscapes, place, and identities are interrelated. In order to better understand identity, it is argued that landscapes should be read as "text" (Duncan 1990), or increasingly, as multiple, often contested, multi-dimensional, and multi-scalar "textures of place" (Adams *et al.* 2001, p. xiv).

The state of Acre is analyzed in this paper as a socially-constructed landscape whose meaning was forged by migrants and their descendents as they adapted to a new "place" and to social relationships constructed around the extraction of rubber for the world market. This landscape later was embraced and transformed in state-wide policy initiatives of the Forest Government. The emergence of the rubber tapper social move-ment, its political victories and expansion to other regions through new federal policies, and incorporation as a key symbol of the new state-wide development initiatives, provide rich material for the analysis of the fractured nature of place and identity at different historical moments and distinct geographical scales.

Environmental identities, affinities and social movements in political ecology

Our analysis of the evolution of the rubber tapper social movement into policy is grounded in place theory and engages with diverse themes in political ecology (PE), a subdiscipline emerging from various traditions in both environmental anthropology and human-environment geography that "combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy" (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, p. 17). PE emerged from the growing environmental consciousness of the 1970s, influenced by Marxist critiques (Peet and Watts 1996) of environmental degradation, colonialism, and Third World Development, and post-structuralist notions of multiple, overlapping and often conflicting understandings of environmental and resource management issues, emphasizing the role of structure, power, control, coercion, complementarity and marginality (Schmink and Wood 1992; Rocheleau *et al.* 1996). While various definitions exist, Robbins (2004, p. 5) argues that "political ecology [in all of its expressions] represents an explicit alternative to 'apolitical' ecology."

The PE focus on environmental identity and social movements draws attention to how "changes in environmental management regimes and environmental conditions have created opportunities or imperatives for local groups to secure and represent themselves politically" (Robbins 2004, p. 15). Campbell (1996) shows how women gained space in the rubber tappers' movement merely because increased head counts were needed, but in doing so gained a voice, to some extent, to begin to express women's issues. Social movements that form in response to an environ-mental issue are often embedded with or used as a platform to express other rights issues. The rubber tappers' movement, while seen by many as an environmental movement, was also at heart a social justice movement, fighting for basic livelihood and territorial rights (Hecht and Cockburn 1990; Allegretti 2002). Bebbington and Batterbury (2001) argue that it is important to look at social movements in terms of differences between and across scales, as well as multiple articulations of such movements. PE

seeks to understand these multiple and often conflicting meanings, such as the ways in which state-led sustainable development policies have shaped emerging new identities and the boundaries of forested places in Acre.

A key component to understanding many new social movements involves understanding environmental identity. Haraway (1991, p. 155) argues that identities are complex and "fractured," impossible to define by a single adjective. While many scholars have a long history of romanticizing peasant and indigenous groups (for further discussion, see Bolaños 2011; Turner and Butzer 1992), Haraway (1991, p. 177) tells us that it is time to move beyond long held dualisms such as good/bad, green/not green, nature/culture, and instead see identity as consisting of multiple categories, or affinities. M. Becker (2004) suggests that many Latin American social groups have "hybrid identities" based on an intersecting bricolage of culture and place embedded in their own personal struggles, as well as over-riding social, political, and economic factors. Therefore, a social movement and its collective, constructed, and individual environmental identities will likely mean different things to different social actors over different periods of time.

Methods

This paper draws upon field research carried out by the authors between 2003 and 2005 that explored the idea of what it means to be a "rubber tapper" in Acre today. As part of our fieldwork, Gomes and Vadjunec completed a total of 130 household interviews with rubber tapper families within the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve (CMER) between March 2004 and January 2005 in conjunction with the Group for Research and Extension in Agroforestry Systems in Acre (PESACRE). Each interview was conducted in Portuguese and, when possible, included both the male and female household head(s). This process took about three hours to complete; we asked both open- and close-ended questions regarding land-use and livelihood activities, as well as open and close-ended questions about rubber tapper identity. Specifically, we asked whether or not the household heads considered themselves to be a "rubber tapper" first and foremost, rather than an agriculturalist, colonist, or small-scale cattle rancher (close-ended question). We then asked the interviewee to define what it meant to be a rubber tapper today (open-ended question). Responses were qualitatively coded using a pile sorting technique.

Additionally, we completed more than twenty semi-structured, open-ended interviews with leaders of the social movement, as well as officials from IBAMA (Brazilian Environmental Agency) at the municipal, state and national levels, municipal heads, state officials, and staff from environmental NGOs with projects in the region. Interviews focused on the institutional actors involved in green development projects in the region, as well as their perceptions of the other actors. These interviews

provided context and served to develop a comparison across communities and scales regarding key characteristics of development policy in Acre, as well as an outside understanding of rubber tapper identity. The results of this study are reported in the sections on extractive reserves and rubber tapper identity.

A separate study of the capital city, Rio Branco, tracked changes in the urban population over a 15-year period, from 1989–2004, including the first years of the Forest Government that took power in 1999. Random household surveys of 420 to 800 households were conducted from independent samples of the capital's population drawn every five years (1989, 1994, 1999, and 2004). Teams of local researchers interviewed the self-defined household head, collecting data on all household members as well as the respondent's parents and siblings who were living elsewhere. These data, reported in more detail in Schmink and Cordeiro (2008), provided quantitative information, over time, on the domestic group, economic strategies, migration, perspectives on Rio Branco, life quality, and access to urban services of a representative sample of urban households. That study also shed light on policies to support forestry development and to celebrate the state's history, issues discussed in the sections on the Forest Government and "forest citizenship."

Lastly, we collected ethnographic and other data at various private and public functions in both rural and urban settings. Observing the deployment and consumption of symbolic representations of rubber tapper history, especially differences across urban and rural scales, helped to provide additional insight into the complex nature of rubber tapper and forest citizen identities.

Rubber boom and bust in Acre

Acre is the northwesternmost state in the Brazilian Amazon, bordering Peru and Bolivia (Figure 2). With a current population of just over a half a million, Acre is a small state in demographic terms, representing only 3% of the Legal Amazon's population (IBGE 2005).[3]

Starting with the rubber boom of the late 19th century, the state has had a long history of land conflicts related to territories occupied for the extraction and commercialization of latex from the native Amazonian *Hevea brasiliensis,* or rubber tree, for the world market (Coelho 1982). *Acriano* identity has been intimately and historically enmeshed with the rubber tapper identity that emerged here (Hecht and Cockburn 1990). Tens of thousands of landless poor migrants were encouraged by the Brazilian government to migrate into the rubber territories from the drought-stricken areas of the Brazilian Northeast region, first during the rubber boom at the turn of the 19th century (1870–1914), and later during a brief second rubber boom during World War II (Martinello 1988; Barham and Coomes 1996). In Acre, rubber tappers faced extreme hardships under the

Figure 2.   Location of the study site.

traditional debt-peonage (*aviamento*) system dominated by the *patrão,* or rubber barons (de Oliveira Filho 1979). Under this strict system, rubber tappers first began to identify themselves as such, based primarily on the only allowed activity: tapping rubber.

After both rubber booms, many rubber estates were abandoned by the rubber barons, leaving the rubber tappers for the first time free to work

the land for themselves. Over several decades, the rubber tappers evolved into an autonomous "forest peasantry" (da Silva 2005), and new generations of Acre-born rubber tappers participated in the construction of a distinctive socioeconomic and cultural institution centered on the *seringal*—encompassing both the rubber groves themselves, and the production and supply system for rubber with its distinctive cultural dimensions (Esteves 1999). Rubber tappers continued to rely heavily on rubber collecting (for local and regional markets) as well as subsistence farming for their livelihoods until the 1970s, when Brazil's military government officially opened up the Amazon for development by outside investors (Santos 1980). In Acre, these policies led to violent land conflicts between rubber tappers and cattle ranchers, where traditional rubber estates were being turned over to cattle ranchers and cleared for the creation of pasture, evicting many rubber tappers and their families in the process (Costa Sobrinho 1992).

The rubber tappers' movement

Starting in the mid-1970s, the rubber tappers began to resist land eviction, with support from the emerging rural worker's unions in Acre at the time (Keck 1995; Allegretti 2002; de Sant'Ana Junior 2004). After a series of violent and deadly conflicts, the rubber tappers began to look for alternative forms of protest and political action, joining forces with local Catholic churches, forming grassroots organizations and encouraging *empates*, or organized, non-violent stand-offs (Bakx 1986; Esteves 1999). The rubber tapper leaders were highly aware of the outside world and crafted their image to respond, in part, to global environmental concerns at the time. They took advantage of the international publicity gained from *empates*, shaping and celebrating their rubber tapper identity—stressing their long and important history in the region, their important place in society as traditional peoples with traditional land uses, their alliance with the indigenous population, as well as their eco-friendly lifestyle. Rubber tapper leader Chico Mendes (1989, p. 72) describes the situation succinctly:

> At the same time as 100 or 200 colleagues are involved in the *empate*, standing in the way of chainsaws and scythes, we aim to have a team whose job it is to get information about what is happening back to Xapuri where another group will make sure it travels all over Brazil and the rest of the world.

In 1985, the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) was created, and the rubber tappers' movement joined forces with various international environmental NGOs pressing for the sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods articulated in the recently published *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987). Rubber tappers came to be viewed by

environmentalists as protectors of the forest, extracting mainly rubber and other renewable NTFPs. To ensure the sustainability of both traditional peoples and their forests, rubber tappers called for the immediate creation of extractive reserves, similar to indigenous reserves where, in exchange for land security, they would serve as gatekeepers for vast tracts of forest (CNS 1985). In the *Forest People's Manifesto* published by the CNS, the rubber tappers state:

> We demand a development policy that favors workers. . . . We rubber tappers
> demand to be recognized as producers of rubber and as the true defenders
> of the forest. (cited in Hecht and Cockburn 1990, pp. 261–262)

After 1988, the assassination of rubber tapper leader Chico Mendes led to increasing pressure from the international community, and the proposed extractive reserves of the rubber tappers' movement finally became a reality with the creation of the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve in 1990.

The creation and later expansion of the extractive reserves gave the rubber tappers' movement national and international visibility, and provided the state of Acre with an opportunity to become a leader in carving out a new vision for sustainable development in Amazonia. At the same time, important but less visible changes were underway that provided a rapidly changing scenario for the rubber tappers and other *acrianos*. Shifts in federal and state policies, and in local livelihood systems, led to identity changes throughout the increasingly integrated state-wide rural and urban contexts. While on the one hand, the formalization of the Federal Extractive Reserve System (RESEX) institutionalized a grass roots conservation and development proposal oriented to forest-dwelling peoples, parallel investments in urban industrial development created new conditions that challenged the traditional rubber tapper identity and sense of place, both reinforcing and undermining the forest identities of rural and urban populations in Acre. The impacts of these complex but poorly documented changes on the evolution of practices, places, and identities are explored in the remainder of this paper.

Results

Extractive reserves and rubber tapper identities—evolving practices, places, and identities

The most dramatic change to take place in the *seringal* was the abrupt decline of rubber tapping in the extractive reserves due to federal policy shifts. A reserve-wide study completed immediately following the creation of the CMER showed that rubber was still the main source of income for residents of the reserve (Feitosa 1995, p. 70). Market agriculture played only a minor role in family income, while small animal production and cattle ranching were practically non-existent (Feitosa 1995, p. 70). In the

mid 1990s, however, world rubber prices fell, and the federal government suspended protective policies in place for decades that had provided the rubber industry with credits and tax incentives, while regulating the price and import of processed latex.

Residents of the CMER responded by practically abandoning rubber production, although still relying on other NTFPs, such as Brazil nuts, fruits and resins for a portion of their livelihoods, and diversifying their production systems to increasingly include market agriculture, mainly beans, rice, corn and manioc, and small animal production (i.e., chickens, goats, sheep, and cattle). Small-scale cattle ranching is currently the main land-use driving deforestation in the CMER, with some areas of the reserve quickly approaching legal deforestation limits (see Gomes 2009; Vadjunec *et al.* 2009). The "Forest Government" elected to office in 1999 also changed the terrain of place and practice, seeking to reverse land-use changes in the region through a renewed dedication and reinvestment in sustainable forestry, including the (modest) regulation of both rubber and Brazil nut prices in the state of Acre, with the hope of increasing traditional extractivist incomes while halting deforestation (Viana 2004).

These important changes underway in the rural areas were reflected in shifts in the identities of rubber tappers, as revealed by the qualitative coding of open-ended responses to questions on rubber tapper identity from the 130 heads of households surveyed in the CMER in 2003. Results revealed that the great majority of rubber tapper responses (85%) revolved around three main themes: current practice (tapping rubber or not); the historic past and participation in the rubber tappers' movement; and sense of place. The following examples illustrate the ambivalent and shifting views of these dimensions of rubber tapper identity as expressed by most responses gathered in the field.[4]

Rubber tapper practice

The simplest definition of "rubber tapper" involves what one actually does—tap rubber. This is the definition that NGOs, researchers, development agencies and government officials most often use without question. The rubber tappers interviewed, however, expressed this apparently straightforward definition in more nuanced and contradictory ways. Surprisingly, only 33% of households surveyed defined rubber tapper identity based on actual practice. As one resident of the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve claimed: "You must tap rubber to be a rubber tapper." Yet another rubber tapper explained: "Yes, I still tap rubber. I was born and will die with the name rubber tapper on my lips." Among those who defined rubber tapper identity based mainly on the practice of tapping rubber, 40% surveyed did not actually tap rubber, and therefore did not define themselves as a rubber tapper, but rather as a colonist, agriculturalist, or small-scale cattle rancher. Typical responses include: "No, I am

not [a rubber tapper]. I no longer tap rubber" or "I have never tapped rubber in my life."

On the other hand, although less than 42% of the 130 rubber tapper households surveyed tapped rubber, a large majority of these, approximately 78%, still considered themselves to be rubber tappers first and foremost, rather than small-scale agriculturalists, colonists, cattle ranchers or some other designation. Those who continued to tap rubber emphasized their pride in this heritage. The contradictory responses collected in the interviews in the CMER illustrate the complex ways in which changing livelihood practices interacted with other dimensions of rubber tapper identity. For many residents of the CMER the radical shift in their land-use and livelihood practices away from rubber and NTFPs, and towards market agriculture and animal production, came with a real sense of ambivalence and regret. For others, particularly those heavily involved in the movement, there was a growing sense of betrayal. At the annual meeting of the CNS in 2003, one angry rubber tapper accused those residents of the reserve who continued to invest in cattle as literally "stabbing their fallen brother Chico Mendes in the back." Key informant interviews also revealed increasing tension between NGOs, government agencies, and rubber tappers, with some agencies perceiving rubber tappers as having "abandoned their class." As one local municipal leader explained, "The rubber tapper does not exist anymore. He is dead." When asked the question of what it means to be a rubber tapper today, one household head took off his hat, shook his head and said, "The reserve today is full of colonists. No one is a rubber tapper anymore."

While some respondents glorified the bygone past, others in the reserve remarked on the low status of rubber tappers in Acre. Respondents equated "rubber tappers" with poverty, lack of access to infrastructure, education, and healthcare. As one rubber tapper aptly put it, "to be a rubber tapper is to belong to a class that everyone wants to forget."

Historic past and participation in the movement

Rubber tappers in the CMER also frequently referred to the history of the rubber tappers' social movement as a key dimension of rubber tapper identity. The movement was initially successful because of both its visibility and the high level of participation in it of men, women, and even children. Although local leaders often claimed in key informant interviews that participation had fallen off, household surveys revealed that approximately 50% of households still actively participated in the community and municipal—level rubber tapper associations and rural worker's unions. Many rubber tappers (25%) were united by and continued to define themselves primarily based on their historic past ties to rubber and/or their participation in the movement. As one rubber tapper argued,

"even though we do not tap rubber anymore, we are united together in our fight as rubber tappers. We stood beside Chico Mendes to win this reserve."

Many expressed their historic ties to tapping rubber, even if not necessarily actively associated with the movement itself. Respondents celebrated, respected, sometimes even romanticized past traditions of rubber tapping, as one rubber tapper explained, "I do not extract rubber anymore, but I am still a rubber tapper. I was created on the milk of the rubber tree. We all were. She created us."

For some, the name "rubber tapper" was seen as a great source of "pride" or "value." Others, however, lamented that "rubber tapper" was beginning to lose its meaning because of the disjuncture between past and present practices.

Rubber tapping was also an activity to which some residents hoped to return should the price of latex improve enough to make it worthwhile. As one resident told us emphatically, "we all have a history of tapping rubber, but many of us do not tap rubber anymore because the price is bad." The strength of the past heritage, and the hope that current changes might be transitory, combined to favor the persistence of rubber tapper identities.

Place

While rubber tappers had increasingly complex, multi-use livelihood trajectories, more than one-quarter began to define themselves more by *where* they lived than *what* they did. With the rich tapestry of long, interwoven, and continuously evolving histories surrounding the importance of rubber in Acre, the success of the social movement with the creation of the CMER, and the election of and support provided by the Forest Government, people had become more deeply united by a place, a philosophy, and the forest. Overall, 28% of respondents defined being a rubber tapper by where they lived, not by what they did or their past histories.

The symbol of working forests had expanded; it now represented not only the reserve, but also Acre, as a larger all-encompassing landscape linked to the practices associated with the forest as well as the place of the forest. For example, a household head who defined himself as a rubber tapper, even though he had not tapped rubber in many years, explained how the past practice of tapping rubber was intertwined with the struggles of the social movement to win their "place" in the reserve:

> I grew up tapping rubber—for this reason, I am a rubber tapper. Without the rubber tapper, we would not have this reserve today. We would not have this reserve without our name, our blood, our sweat. For these reasons we are all rubber tappers.

For many, being a rubber tapper meant much more than just tapping rubber; instead it meant "living in the reserve," residing in a "special place," being a "guardian of the reserve," or "caring for the forest." As one rubber tapper explained while pointing to the surrounding forest, "Everyone who lives *here* is a rubber tapper." This strong sense of place—a place defined as the forest—was the basis for the Forest Government's proposals for sustainable development with "forest citizenship." Being a rubber tapper even had the ability to transcend the reserve, as well as the rural-urban divide, albeit imperfectly with the rapid changes underway. As one rubber tapper explained:

> Rubber tappers aren't just those who tap rubber. Whoever lives in the *seringal* is a rubber tapper. Whoever lives in the reserve is a rubber tapper. In the city there are even rubber tappers. Sadly, the name "rubber tapper" has been prejudiced. It's a dirty word.

Residents of the CMER often commented on the pejorative connotation of rubber tapper identity because of its association with illiteracy and poverty. For others, rubber tapper identity had become negative more recently, mainly because it was sometimes used by NGOs and government agencies as a means of controlling the definition of acceptable and unacceptable land-use and livelihood activities in the reserves, often against the aspirations of rubber tappers who sought to diversify their livelihood practices and increase their cattle herds.

Not only were residents of the CMER increasingly involved in mixed land-use activities, but they were also increasingly urbanized. Their children often had no option but to attend middle and secondary school in the nearest outside cities. The majority of the reserve's residents had relatives who lived in the surrounding urban areas, and 30% of the CMER's current residents came either from a colonization project, urban, or peri-urban area before moving into the CMER. In 2003, 10% of the rubber tappers surveyed already owned a house in the city, and approximately 10% were thinking of moving outside the reserve to the surrounding urban areas.

The surprising persistence of the rubber tapper identity, even with the sharp decline of rubber tapping as a key livelihood practice over more than a decade, the turnover in population, and increasing ties to urban areas, reveals the complex and contradictory nature of rubber tapper identity. Deep roots in cultural history, in the experience of political mobilization in the rubber tapper social movement, and the broader consciousness of their role as "forest guardians," as well as an attachment to the reserve as a place for which the movement had fought hard, kept alive the rubber tapper social and political identity even in the face of rapid livelihood changes. These contradictory aspects of identity (being a "rubber tapper") versus practice (no longer tapping rubber) emerged, in

part, in response to the sustainable development and cultural revitalization policies of the Forest Government that was elected to office in 1999, and whose political project specifically was grounded in the history of rubber tappers, their struggles, and their place—the forest.

The Forest Government and "forest citizenship"—urban-industrial identities and places

Translating the lofty goals of "forest citizenship," or *Florestania*, into practice required the Forest Government to adopt a series of strategies to reverse changes in land-use practice, affirm the historical and cultural roots of the extractivist past, and forge a new sense of place among *acrianos* that could encompass both rural and urban areas, while investing heavily in the modernization of the state's economy. The resulting policies had important impacts in the complex and evolving identities of both rural and urban populations of the state.

Forest development policies

One of the first policies implemented in 1999 was the Chico Mendes law, which was intended to revive the practice of rubber tapping, as well as NTFP extraction, the mainstays of the traditional rubber tapper identity. The measure provided an additional payment per kilo of rubber to tappers who had their documents and were members of legally-constituted producer associations (Kainer *et al.* 2003). Reversing the federal government's withdrawal of rubber subsidies in the 1990s, the state measure provided an important immediate benefit to its political base among rubber tappers, endeavoring to keep the extractivists living in the forests and to promote their organization as producers and as citizens. The government also created new institutions to focus on forest production and marketing, including a State Forestry Secretariat and a network of regional cooperatives linked to a state-level organization, COOPERACRE. Ten years later, this rubber-support policy would bear fruit with the installation of a state-of-the-art condom factory managed by the state government. This factory buys native rubber from hundreds of rubber tappers and makes it into condoms that are sold to the federal government's Department of Health. Brazil nut processing factories were also established in Xapurí and in Brasiléia. The government sought to subsidize the continuation of the practice of tapping rubber and support the development of complementary NTFPs such as Brazil nuts, *copaiba*, and *andiroba* oils. As rubber tappers in different regions began to involve themselves in these new initiatives, their identity broadened from that of "rubber tapper" to "extractivists"—a new label later adopted by the National Rubber Tappers Council to acknowledge its changing constituency. For those who opted to remain in the extractive reserve instead of migrating to

urban areas, these policies provided an important stimulus to revive their extractivist identities and ties to the forest, now in a more modern guise.

Alongside these investments in extractivist product marketing to strengthen the identity-based practices of former rubber tappers, the state also made controversial major investments in sustainable timber management (Kainer *et al.* 2003). Given the difficulties and uncertainties of developing diversified NTFP markets, the certain profits to be had from the growing demand for tropical timber were seen as a key component of the state's development strategy. These investments were funded by the state, as well as major loans from the National Economic and Social Development Bank (BNDES), and the Inter-American Development Bank. The state's ambitious forest policies focused on both commercial and community forest management, and were supported by a new Forestry College.

In order to develop urban-based value-added processing of forest goods from rural areas, the state stimulated the creation of Furniture Development Growth Poles in both Rio Branco and Xapurí, and brought in outside consultants for the design and development of high quality projects for both internal and external markets. These investments were especially important in Xapurí, the historic heart of Acre's rubber tapper cultural history and the site of Chico Mendes' home, where he was assassinated in 1988. These important events in Acre's cultural history were celebrated with the construction and refurbishing of local museums and an incipient tourism initiative in Xapurí, alongside the installation of a high-tech flooring factory and a dozen other forest industries.

By 2008, the forest sector had increased its share from 7.4% to 18% of the state's production, and it accounted for half of the state's exports; the proportion of processed wood products coming from managed forests grew from only 5.7% in 2002 to 84% in 2008 (Acre State Government 2008). The Antimary State Forest became the first and only certified public forest in Brazil. The state's investments in public forests and public-private joint ventures paid off primarily in the expansion and modernization of commercial logging enterprises. Among extractivists, the response was more ambivalent. Technical difficulties and political opposition slowed the state's plans for implementation of community forest management in dozens of extractivist communities. The lingering strength of the "rubber tapper" or "extractivist" identity among many forest residents, and the memory of the historical struggle against outside loggers and ranchers, led many rubber tappers to resist transforming their "place" into a site for timber extraction. On the other hand, some former rubber tappers embraced timber management as a viable strategy to modernize and diversify their forest production systems, while still struggling with the uncertainties of techniques for sustainable timber management, including the costly and stringent requirements for timber certification.

Forest citizenship

In addition to policies promoting the revival of extractivist practices, the state also invested in celebrating the state's unique history rooted in the forest, seeking to improve the self-esteem of rural inhabitants previously dismissed as invisible, poor, and backward. In the state capital, Rio Branco, the Forest Government's initial investments focused on revitalizing the historical center of the city (palaces, museums, libraries, parks, riverside, markets) that celebrated the state's strong sense of autonomy from the federal government,[5] as well as the rubber tapper history and political mobilization, symbolized by the statues of Chico Mendes, the Chico Mendes Park and Zoo, a modern stadium called the Forest Arena, a modern public library called the Forest Library, and the remodeled historic commercial center dating from the rubber boom at the turn of the century. (See Figures 1, 3 and 4.) The Chico Mendes prize, awarded each year on the anniversary of the rubber tapper leader's death, was created to recognize people and programs that contribute to sustainable development in the state.

In 2009, the state government launched a major program called "Digital Forest" with the aim of providing free wireless internet access for cities throughout the entire state (Figure 5). Implemented first in Rio Branco, it made this city the first Brazilian capital city with full free internet access. A public radio station ended each nightly broadcast with the state's anthem, strengthening residents' sense of pride as *acrianos*. The state government also sponsored a new historical opera, and a nationally-telecast mini-series, *Amazônia, De Galvez a Chico Mendes* (TV Globo

Figure 3. A symbol of Acre's illustrious past: the recently renovated Governor's Palace, originally built in 1930, Rio Branco, Acre. Photograph by Carlos Valério A. Gomes.

Figure 4. Statues of Chico Mendes and son, Sandino, at Rubber Tappers' Square in downtown Rio Branco. Photograph by Carlos Valério A. Gomes.

2007), that brought Acre's rich cultural heritage to a broader audience as well as to residents of the state capital. Rubber tapper poetry, artwork and music regularly kicked off public events.

These multiple initiatives sought to transform the state's history from a heritage of isolation, poverty and backwardness, to one of heroism and unique pride. Alongside efforts to build identity through supporting extractivist practices and to celebrate the state's history, the government also sought to reinforce pride of place by forging a state-wide identity as *acrianos*. A new form of citizenship—*Florestania*—would encompass

Figure 5. Rio Branco's urban "Digital Forest" with free Wi-Fi access. Photograph by Carlos Valério A. Gomes.

the rural cultural roots in the forest but also deliver the benefits of development that previously had been denied to all but the state's elites. Residents of Rio Branco enjoyed improvements such as the construction of principal thoroughfares and recuperation or construction of new access highways (the Chico Mendes Highway), including a new airport and new bridges, as well as growth of the industrial sector (Moreira 2006). (See Figures 6 and 7.)

Urban *Florestania*

With these public investments, Rio Branco's "urban forest" was becoming the command center for the sustainable development project of the Forest Government in Acre (Becker 2005). The Forest Government's policies led to growth of Acre's gross domestic product at rates higher than those for Brazil as a whole, and for the Amazon region, from 1989 to 2003 (IBGE 2003, cited in Schmink and Cordeiro 2008, p. 99). The social benefits from these policies were reflected in the improved life expectancy, reduced infant mortality rates, increased literacy and higher education levels of *acrianos*, especially those living in the capital.

An accelerated process of rural-to-urban migration in Acre, beginning in the 1970s, led to an increase of the urban population (as defined by the Brazilian census bureau) by over 500% in 2000, growing from 28% to 66% of the total population (IBGE 2005). These migrants sought out Rio Branco in large part due to the historically unequal process of economic development, which generated important differences in life quality

Figure 6. Recently renovated trading and counting houses celebrating Acre's rubber tapping past ("the old market") meets bustling downtown Rio Branco. State of the art pedestrian suspension bridge takes forest citizens back and forth across the Rio Acre bridging the old and new business districts. Photograph by Carlos Valério A. Gomes.

Figure 7. A new road built under the Forest Government (with Forest Government logo/Brazil nut tree) serves Rio Branco's new international airport and growing industrial zone. Photograph by Carlos Valério A. Gomes.

between rural and urban areas, and between the capital and other cities and towns. Strong family ties also influenced the migration process, and are cited even more often than economic reasons for moving to the capital. Most of the people living in Rio Branco had previously lived in a rubber tapping area, revealing the still-strong rural roots in the urban setting. However, their previous *urban* experience was far stronger: a large and growing percentage had lived in another city before moving to Rio Branco (73% in 1980, growing to 93% in 2004). In 2004, approximately 72% migrated directly to Rio Branco from another urban area. Data on employment and migration patterns of the current and previous generation of Rio Branco's population reveal a shift into urban, salaried employment from rural informal or self-employment. The urban population was distancing itself from its forest extractivist past, while at the same time receiving many of the benefits of *Florestania*.

These results reveal a profile of predominantly internal interurban migration, no longer a flow dominated by rubber tapper refugees. Moreover, approximately 60% of Rio Branco migrants said they would not return under any conditions to the rural area, and 80% were not interested in returning to rubber tapping areas. In response to government policies to improve conditions there, more people (30% in 2004 compared to only 16% in 1989) began to express interest in returning to the rural areas if they received land. This incentive appealed primarily to less wealthy urban residents. Among the poorest half of the Rio Branco population interviewed, slightly more than half said they would consider returning to the rural areas if they received land—twice as likely as the wealthy residents interviewed.

Although differences persisted between the richest and poorest families in Rio Branco, significant improvements emerged in many social indicators for all urban social groups under the Forest Government. Compared to other rural and urban areas of Acre, Rio Branco's residents enjoyed more employment opportunities, better-quality housing, increased access to cooking fuel and other goods, and to urban services including electricity, garbage collection, piped water, access to public transport, churches, schools, health posts, leisure facilities, and local commercial enterprises such as groceries, butcher shops, bakeries, pharmacies, and other stores—which multiplied rapidly after 1999 (Schmink and Cordeiro 2008). Residents of the capital (especially poorer residents) were increasingly hopeful about the future impact of the city. The tangible improvements in life quality, and the efforts of the Forest Government to strengthen pride in Acre's culture and history, contributed to the *acriano* sense of place under the banner of *Florestania*, and encouraged most urban dwellers to want to remain in the capital, despite the limitations and inequities of the economy of the capital. While the long-term sustainability and environmental impact of *Florestania* policy remains uncertain, the Forest Government's development policy remains a remarkably ambitious attempt to improve quality of life, well-being, and confidence of its citizens to make Acre "the best place to live in the Amazon region" (Acre State Government 2008, p. 14).

Emerging forest citizens: bridging the rural-urban divide

The rapid socio-economic, cultural and political changes among rural and urban populations of Acre discussed here reveal the fluid and fractured nature of the identities being forged under the influence of both the rubber tappers' movement and *Florestania* policies. In the extractive reserve named for the rubber tappers' famous leader, residents struggled to reconcile the heritage of rubber tapping practices, successful social movement struggles, and a deep pride in the forest as their place, with the persistent poverty associated with a rubber economy in decline, the regret and anger over increasing deforestation in the reserve, and resentment of the imposition of outsider definitions of rubber tapper livelihood practices. The rubber tapper identity persisted, with its roots in practice, history, and place, despite the rapid changes underway in their livelihood systems, social movements, and the forest itself. Among social movement leaders, the adoption of the broader identity of "extractivists" encouraged by statewide initiatives served as a bridge to this new reality, maintaining the essence of the forest steward identity. Especially among younger or more recent residents, however, many had abandoned the pejorative identity of rubber tapper in favor of identities associated with the more modern practices of agricultural and cattle production, and living in urban areas.

In the capital city of Rio Branco, urban migrants and growing urban-born generations commingled as families combined rural and urban residences, and the important political and cultural history of the rubber tappers was both reinforced by the Forest Government's policies, and undermined by the urbanizing and modernizing development processes set in motion in the ambitious state development plans. With a substantial majority of the state's population living in urban areas, the concept of "forest citizen" was crafted as a new all-encompassing identity associated with the emerging identity of the state, still tied to the past practices and places that made it unique. As a citizenship project, *Florestania* policies were intended to both counterbalance the inherently unequal impacts of development (in the classic sense of citizenship; see Marshall 1950), and to forge a strong state identity that could unite people across generations and bridge the rural-urban divide.

This research reveals the tensions and fluid relations among urban and rural forest citizens in Acre. While rubber tappers continued to be celebrated in the city as part of the discourse of *Florestania*, through music, opera and poetry among other things, rubber tappers regularly complained about the government's neglect of the rural areas. When asked about the benefits of *Florestania*, rubber tappers acknowledged the better prices received for NTFP products, and other advances, but some also argued that too few of the benefits of the Forest Government actually reached the rubber tapping areas; rather, they perceived the bulk of benefits to remain in Rio Branco, far away from the actual forest. One rural municipal official declared, "Where is the Forest Government? We are here still waiting. . . ." Such comments reveal the limits of the reach of the Forest Government's development plans.

Conclusions

This study has focused on how the socially-constructed landscape that is now the state of Acre has evolved over more than a century of migration, influenced by rubber boom and bust cycles, as well as more recent livelihood changes, and political mobilization. Rapid changes underway in Acre since the initial victories of the rubber tappers in the 1990s have gone relatively unnoticed in the literature on this well-known social movement, although this research reveals that they have set in motion contradictory shifts in identity and sense of place as other livelihood practices have increasingly taken precedence over tapping rubber in the extractive reserve. Instead, new and expanded identities ("extractivists") have emerged that strategically broaden the social movement identity while maintaining the crucial tie to the forest as their place, and new official brands ("forest citizens") embrace the rubber tappers and their forest as part of the statewide identity, and tie the forest to a modernizing project whose effects,

contradictorily, often benefit the more wealthy urban dwellers over the still-isolated and poor forest dwellers.

As new generations take their place in both rural and urban spaces in Acre, the distance among and between the many forest identities may become ever greater. The complex nature of evolving identities and lifestyles in the state provide a significant challenge for realistic development policies that can address multiple and sometimes contradictory demands. By celebrating forest lifestyles, *Florestania* carved out a much-needed, legitimate space for forest people as they became part of the increasingly dominant urban Amazonian landscape. As more people move to urban areas, *Florestania* serves to provide an important link to the forest through the idea of forest citizenship, while at the same time forcing the government to invest more heavily in urban infrastructure, thus, to some extent, encouraging even greater urbanization. *Florestania* will continue to be successful to the extent that both rural and urban peoples achieve equal voice and benefits in the development process, in accordance with their changing identities, needs, and aspirations.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The term was coined by Antônio Alves Leitão Neto, an advisor to the state government in Acre.
2. People from Acre, according to the new spelling rules instituted in Brazil in 2008.
3. The "Legal Amazon" refers to the official designation of the Brazilian Amazon Region according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). This political and administrative region has expanded over time (see Browder and Godfrey 1997, p. 18), to include the states of Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Mato Grosso, Maranhão, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima, and Tocantins.
4. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and for ease of reading, direct quotations are presented here anonymously, and were translated by the authors from Portuguese. Quotations were selected from household interviews completed with rubber tapper families within the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve (CMER) between March 2004 and January 2005 (see methods section for further detail).
5. The state briefly was an independent country at the turn of the 20th century, from 1899 to 1900 (see Schmink and Cordeiro 2009).

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