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Land Practices in the Brazilian Amazon Offer Alternative Solutions (Episode 18)

Christopher Hamilton

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The intro

<<OtterPod theme music>>

This is an episode of the OTTERPOD from CSU Monterey Bay.

<<Jungle Sounds>>

The Amazon Rainforest is one of Earth's greatest natural treasures. With its approximately three billion trees, the Amazon absorbs roughly a quarter of Earth's CO₂, making it a key part of regulating the global climate (Amazon Watch, 2023).

But with continually encroaching development and destruction, this natural wonder has become one of the most important battlegrounds in the fight against climate change

On the front lines of this fight are the local communities of the Amazon with roughly 350 distinct ethnic groups that call the region home.

The local people of the Amazon have been instrumental in fighting big corporations in their attempts to extract its precious resources

The Amazonian people however, do not only challenge the destructive extraction of natural resources, they challenge the Western colonial view of nature itself, blurring the line between the natural and man-made through their intimate relationship to the land in which they live.

<<Music>>

What can the communities of the Amazon teach us from the ways in which they challenge the colonial extraction mindset?

In the Western colonial way of thinking, nature is considered to be all plants, animals, and features of the earth separate from human activity

<<Bird Sounds>>

With the addition of human activity, these things are no longer considered natural.

A field of corn is not a part of nature, nor are domestic animals, nor a building, since they have been modified by humanity.

In this binary understanding of the world as either “natural” or “man-made”, any human activity within an environment is seen as an interference with “pristine nature”

But what is one to think when these distinctions aren't so clear?

For example, in Anna Tsing's “History of Weediness”, she describes the Meratus Dyak people who live in semi-subsistence communities in the mountains of Southern Borneo, as inhabiting a landscape that is both socially and naturally constructed.

In a “social natural landscape”, the plants and animals that the Meratus people interact with are neither fully wild nor fully domesticated.

Such blurred lines between the natural and the man-made do not fall easily into current Western understanding of civilization and “pristine nature”.

In this binary way of understanding the world, humanity must be separated from natural environments in order to protect them.

The separation of human activities from natural environments is what we commonly refer to as conservation.

Under what has been referred to as the extraction-conservation nexus, land is either for human exploitation, or to be protected against it (Le Billon, 2021, p. 202).

According to Nishnaabeg indigenous scholar, Leanne Simpson, this logic of extraction and indigenous resistance to it is deeply rooted in Europe's colonization of the Americas.

Under colonial logic, Simpson writes “My land is seen as a resource. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources...The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning... That's always been a part of colonialism and conquest” (Simpson, 2017, p. 75).

Many scholars have observed however, that this colonial binary between extraction and conservation may in fact be counterproductive to the broad goal of global sustainability.

The separation between human and non-human, they observe, is in fact the central logic behind environmental degradation (Vega-Leinert and Clausing, 2016).

<<Music>>

When human societies no longer consider themselves members of the delicate natural cycles that allow life on Earth to persist, their actions may easily disrupt these systems.

Therefore, to truly challenge the environmental issues that the world faces, we must shift the modern understanding of nature.

What would such a paradigm shift look like? In order to find out, I looked to communities in the Brazilian Amazon.

Anthropologist Darrel Posey spent much of his life living with and researching the culture of the Kayapo people, a tribe indigenous to the Central Brazilian Amazon.

What he observed in his time spent with this tribe was a wealth of knowledge about how human communities can exist within thriving natural ecosystems.

Such insights do not only provide new ideas to the Western world, they challenge many of the assumptions of the colonial worldview.

For example, in Kayapo culture, although useful plants are regularly cultivated, there is little distinction made between domestic and wild species. Similarly so with animal species, as shown by the roughly 60 species of birds, reptiles, mammals and insects coexisting within Kayapo villages.

The Kayapo create what they call “forest fields”, integrated semi-cultivated landscapes that create favorable growing conditions for useful plant species.

These forest fields, with their variety of edible plants, also attract various species of animals, simultaneously bolstering wildlife populations and creating useful hunting grounds for the Kayapo.

5:06

The close connection that these social-natural landscapes bring creates a notable sense of responsibility to other living things in Kayapo society.

<<Music>>

One of Posey’s most interesting observations about the Kayapo was their almost intuitive sense for reciprocity and sustainability.

In his 2005 book, *Kayapo Ethnology and Culture*, Posey describes their view of the world in which, “All living objects are endowed with universal energy and, therefore, all life is to be revered and protected. Energy is encapsulated in living forms, but leaves the physical form (whether plant, animal or human) at death... Eventually, energy is reconstituted into new life.

The whole energy transformation process takes a conceptually long period of time that cannot be precisely measured or expressed by the Kayapó; nonetheless, there is a sense of ‘natural’ rate of plant and animal exploitation that, if exceeded, will upset the energy transformation process and thereby upset the natural energy balance” (Posey, 2005, p.12)

One cannot help but wonder what modern Western civilization would be like if it felt such duty towards other living things.

Posey viewed this wisdom as essential in the creation of a sustainable future in the Amazon region.

He noted that while “Past efforts to develop the Amazon have been such clear failures”, Kayapo “ecological adaptations and agricultural strategies offer new models for resource management of the Amazon” (Posey, 2005, p. 11).

Posey, who became an advocate for indigenous rights later in his life feared however that without proper care, utilizing such knowledge would become, “another colonial invasion” this time “to mine and exploit the last knowers of the secrets of the Neotropics” (Posey, 2005, p. 11).

<<Music>>

Instead, Posey proposed what he called an “ideological bridge” between traditional and modern, where indigenous people are viewed “as active participants in the process, whose ideas are integrated into new, more socially and ecologically rational strategies of change” and are “recognized as a diligent, intelligent and practical people” (Posey, 2005, p. 11).

The intimate relationship to the natural world that Darrel Posey observed in the Kayapo people can be found in indigenous cultures around the world.

Although these systems are deeply rooted in the indigenous traditions of connection and reciprocity, challenges to the colonial conception of nature can be found in rural communities throughout Brazil’s Amazon region.

<<Village sounds>>

These communities demonstrate how indigenous land-relationships can be implemented in other contexts, with exciting results for both environmental protection and human well-being.

One study conducted in 2022 looked at the varying degrees of integration between human activities and natural ecosystems in rural communities in Northern Brazil (Carmenta, et.al, 2022).

The study analyzed communities of mixed colonial and indigenous descent in the region.

Out of the four communities studied, two exhibited “land sparing” strategies in which land is divided into zones of extraction and conservation, while the other two practiced “land sharing” in which human activities are integrated into natural ecosystems.

The land sparing communities included an area of industrial soybean agriculture and a strictly protected area. These are defined as areas of “single sector” use and reinforce the colonial extraction-conservation nexus, in which land is either for human consumption or protected against it.

The land sharing communities included a “sustainable use reserve” and a national forest.

These communities are considered integrated “multiple use areas” in which the local people engage in traditional, low input agriculture, hunting, fishing and small-scale harvesting of products such as Acai and rubber.

These multiple-use areas show many similarities to the “social-natural landscapes” of the Kayapo people as well as indigenous communities around the world.

In communities displaying “land sharing” practices the study found a wide range of benefits to both human and environmental wellbeing when compared to “land sparing” communities.

The study states that, “Positive contributions to the environment, health, welfare, social relations and economic incomes were all highly valued locally and positively impacted in integrated sites”.

In contrast, the study concluded that “Single-sector intervention types appear to incur unreasonable and unjust trade-offs between people, nature and the quest for development” (Carmenta et.al, 2022).

10:02

In addition to benefiting the local communities involved, challenging the colonial perception of nature with these indigenous social-natural landscapes, may in fact be essential to protecting well functioning ecosystems as a whole.

As many environmentalists have pointed out, it simply may not be possible to protect enough “pristine nature” completely devoid of any human inhabitants, to preserve intact ecological systems (Schwartzman et.al, 2000).

Pursuing a narrow perception in which “pristine nature” is the only nature worth preserving may leave us with only fragmented areas of protected land divided by a sea of exploitation.

These fragmented areas would likely do little for the preservation of biodiversity and would face great threats from surrounding extractive industry. In Brazil’s Amazon this has been seen when

the extractive practices from surrounding areas, such as logging and forest fires spread onto large swaths of supposedly protected forest land.

During Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's time in office, from 2019 to 2022, 8.4 million acres of forest were lost to illegal logging and rampant man-made fires, a 52 percent increase from the previous three years (Jones, 2022).

With a third of the fires destroying protected forest land, these demonstrated the sobering reality that as long as extractivist mindsets exist outside, nature, even when defended by park boundaries, can never be fully protected (Fox, 2022).

If integrated human activity, in the model of traditional social-natural landscapes cannot be included in our perception of environmental conservation, it may be impossible to achieve goals of both environmental protection and human wellbeing.

By observing the practices of the Amazon's people however, we can consider alternatives in which both human and non-human life can thrive.

<<Music>>

Perhaps the greatest flaw in the worldview introduced by European colonialism is that these two goals are separate at all.

The communities of the Amazon teach us that when human society is integrated with natural ecosystems, the knowledge that all life is interconnected and dependent on each other becomes a part of one's everyday experience.

With the spread of the extractivist mindset, deeply rooted in European colonization, the connection between the human and non-human worlds have been obscured, but were never removed.

As the climate crisis makes the harmful effects of humanity's exploitation of the Earth increasingly apparent, one may question how much longer humanity will be able to pretend that we are separate from the rest of the planet; That human wellbeing can be attained at the expense of the natural world.

Closing credits

Executive producers of the OtterPod are Dr. Sara Salazar Hughes and Dr. Sriya Shrestha. (Shres-tha) Theme music by Eric Mabrey (May-bree).

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