

Brazil's Amazon region houses latex 'love factory'

November 28 2014, by Madeleine Pradel

Deep in Amazonia, Raimundo Pereira expertly cuts a gash in a rubber tree to collect white sap destined for the nearby factory at Xapuri, the world's only producer of contraceptives made from tropical forest latex.

Raimundo's precise, speedy technique bears witness to the fact that he started work aged just nine, accompanying his rubber-tapper father—himself the son of a rubber tapper—in shifts starting at dawn.

"I'm still doing it at 51. I like this work as the air is pure here. I shall carry on as long as my body holds up," he told AFP.

Raimundo works for the Natex condom factory—affectionately nicknamed "the love factory"—an innovative non-profit venture that is playing a key role in Brazil's fight against AIDS and also providing good jobs for local rubber tappers, paying above-market prices for their labor.

Raimundo can neither read nor write but dubs himself "a connoisseur of products from the forest and medicinal plants."

The father of three children, who are receiving the schooling he didn't, explained: "Today, I no longer think about learning to read. I am proud as the factory has given me social visibility and a better wage."

Chico Mendes territory

The Natex factory was founded in 2008 at Xapuri in the Amazonian state of Acre in Brazil's far north, a place known for the struggles of famous conservationist Chico Mendes, a rubber tapper gunned down in 1988 by local ranchers engaged in deforestation.

The factory came into being thanks to the policies of former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, in office from 2003 to 2010, said director Dirlei Bersh. It was the government which put up the 30 million reais (\$14 million) needed to fund the not-for-profit enterprise.

"In part it was designed to relaunch a dormant economy at a time when the price of rubber had slumped but also to underpin the fight against AIDS via the free distribution of condoms," Bersh said.

So it was that the site earned its "love factory" sobriquet at its inauguration by then secretary of state for health Gerson Penna, at a time when contraception in predominantly Catholic Brazil was something of a taboo.

"To begin with people mocked. But today the 170 employees of Natex are proud of the (AIDS) prevention role of the factory," Bersh said.

Natex today produces around 100 million contraceptives a year—all of them destined for the Brazilian health ministry for distribution to the population at large. In time the firm wants to double capacity.

It is keeping alive a long history of rubber tapping in Amazonia, which first caught the rubber bug in the late 19th century.

The city of Manaus, with its magnificent opera house in the heart of the jungle, symbolizes the prosperity of that era.

But Manaus lost the monopoly on production in 1912 after rubber trees

in Malaysia and Sri Lanka—planted by the British with seeds they smuggled out during the Amazonian rubber boom—ended up producing latex more efficiently and in greater quantity.

'Venus shirts'

Natex's current production equates to a fifth of the 500 million condoms—known as "camisinhas de Venus," or little Venus shirts in Portuguese—that the government hands out annually free of charge in a country where 730,000 people are HIV-positive.

Brazil is a pioneer in the anti-AIDS fight, providing free treatment.

"Natex is the only condom factory in the world to use 'native' latex. Its elasticity and resistance are far superior to that of cultivated latex, mainly imported from Malaysia," said Bersh.

In all, 700 rubber-tapper families have been recruited across the region and 489 have worked to provide the factory this year with 250 tons of natural rubber.

"Rubber-tappers receive eight reais (\$3.50) per kilo of [rubber](#)—that is 270 percent above the market price," said Bersh.

"That includes the value of the product and the environmental services for the tapper's role as a guardian of the forest," a symbol of sustainable development for the entire Amazonia region.

"If Chico Mendes were still alive he would be happy to see that the struggle which he started is still bearing fruit. His dream was to see the forest living," said Raimundo, who knew the slain activist.

Citation: Brazil's Amazon region houses latex 'love factory' (2014, November 28) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-brazil-amazon-region-houses-latex.html>

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