

# TAPAJÓS

## UNDER THE SUN

**A dive into the ecological, sociocultural and economic characteristics of the hydrographic basin**

Bruna Cigaran da Rocha, Ricard Scoles,  
Bruno Peregrina Puga and Ana Blaser



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**International Rivers** is a global organization with regional offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The organization's work and mission is to ensure riverine communities and people affected by dams have their voices heard and their rights respected. The organization helps create active and well-instrumented networks of civil society groups to protect rivers and defend the rights of communities that depend on them. International Rivers also partners with independent investigative researchers and is fearless in its campaign to expose and resist destructive projects. Together with international partners, International Rivers aims to build a world where rivers and their associated aquatic ecosystems can flow free and healthy, where energy generation is clean and sustainable, with infrastructure that meets the true needs of Amazonian populations, without degrading the nature or increasing poverty, and where people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

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Margens do Rio Tapajós

VALDEMIR CUNHA (GREENPEACE)

For the indigenous communities that live on the banks of the Tapajós River, its pebbly waters and noisy waterfalls are a space of communion between traditional knowledge and nature. The River of Life, as the Munduruku indigenous call the Tapajós, has physically and immaterially fed riverside populations for thousands of years.

In the Munduruku cosmology, the birth of ethnicity as a people is intimately linked to the formation of this freshwater ecosystem. **“For us, the Tapajós River is a sacred river. It was created by Karosakaybu (an ancestor revered by the Munduruku). Some Munduruku turned into fish, others into birds, others into trees, oth-**

**ers into local pigs. We know how this river was built, and it is related to our history and that of the forest”**, says the indigenous leader **Cacique Juarez Saw Munduruku** from the village of Saw-ré Muybu.

For riverside dwellers that live on the shores of Tapajós beaches, these waters with a blue past also have a special meaning. **“The Tapajós River is a precious river. It is a road, a source of drinking and bathing. It is also a storeroom: There are tracajá, fish, all these animals that are very important to us”**, explains **Father Edilberto Sena**, leader of the Tapajós Vivo Movement. The riverines, who was born on the riverbank, remembers in his childhood making cups with

his hands and drinking water straight from the spring, due to its crystallinity and purity.

The Tapajós River joins the Amazon valley as it flows into the Brazilian Central Plateau. A series of waterfalls permeate the stretch of river that descends from its main sources, the Jurueña and Teles Pires rivers – these two rivers delimit the border between the Brazilian states of Pará, Mato Grosso and Amazonas – to the area upstream of the city of Itaituba (Pará state). This waterfall stretch has traditionally been nicknamed the 'high' Tapajós, while the 'low' Tapajós refers to the considerably wider free river.

From the 1970s onwards, with the establishment of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) in Itaituba and the increase in the Munduruku presence in this area, the indigenous people also agreed to recognize the 'medium' Tapajós area, which would be the area around the city of Itaituba, both above and below the last waterfalls of the river, in a counterpoint to the 'high Tapajós' which would be located closer to the city of Jacareacanga. It is noteworthy that the river dwell-

ers did not adopt this term, continuing to correspond to the entire waterfall section as the 'high Tapajós'. The medium/high Tapajós comprises the municipalities of Jacareacanga, Trairão and Itaituba, while the lower Tapajós includes the municipalities of Aveiro, Belterra and Santarém.

The publication Tapajós Under the Sun brings together five articles written by researchers from different Brazilian and global institutions, in addition to a journalist involved with indigenous themes and social movements. These are updated texts based on recent bibliography that bring new elements and discoveries about socio-environmental and cultural wealth and diversity, the potential for sustainable development, as well as discussions on threats and conflicts involving different sectors of society in the Tapajós basin region.

The first article reflects on the ecological importance of free-flowing rivers, their biodiversity, habitats and freshwater ecosystems, seasonality, geomorphology and characterization of the transition between the Cerrado and Amazon bi-



Furos: is the natural communication between two rivers or between a river and a lagoon.

VALDEMIR CUNHA (GREENPEACE)



omes. It also points to the need to deepen new studies that raise awareness about the importance of these natural resources.

The second article presents the sociocultural importance of rivers, territories and traditional communities in a historical perspective. It brings components about the livelihoods, cultural identities of indigenous peoples and Tapajônica archeology. It also talks about the direct access and use of natural assets by indigenous and traditional populations. It also shows the knowledge on these themes and the need for further studies.

It is worth reaffirming that the territory of Tapajós is a sacred place for the indigenous ethnic groups that occupy it. For the Mundurukus, the forests that border the waters of the Tapajós tell the story of their people: "We have to teach people who do not know the [Amazonian] forest its history in order to preserve it. Inside the forest there is everything. It has the spirit of the forest, the spirit of the mother of pigs on the igarapés, and we have a relationship with all of that", adds Cacique Juarez.

The third article shows the socioeconomic importance of free and healthy rivers, the ecological economy and ecosystem services, as well as an approach to economic activities of indigenous and traditional populations in contrast to economic activities that are exogenous to traditional and sustainable models.

The fourth article presents an overview of threats and conflicts in the Tapajós basin, involving illegal logging, large mining, palm trees, deforestation, latifundium, and more recently, large infrastructure works such as hydroelectric energy, waterways and highways, which have long been threatening the territories and livelihoods of the populations of the Tapajós basin.

With a history of struggle over decades to preserve the Tapajós territory, Father Edilberto



can easily name the many threats to the river and the ways of life of the Tapajós. Among them, hydroelectric dams and their ability to interrupt the flow of rivers, tearing apart the social fabric of communities that depend on them for their livelihoods.

"The Tapajós River is fed by Teles Pires and Juruena Rivers. Four dams have already been built that destroyed the Teles Pires River. Each such dam slows down the flow of water. To the point that I can say that it is no longer a river, becoming just lakes", the priest explains. "We, the residents of the Tapajós region, want to live. And we want to live well. This is a basic principle. We need fish, pure water, forest, animals, coexistence. These rights are being violated in Tapajós."

Finally, the fifth article seeks to show, in the current context, the threats and conflicts that exist in the region. Throughout the process of occupation of the Amazon and Tapajós basin, deforestation and forest fires occurred mainly along federal highways, forming the area known as the "Arc of Deforestation". Today the "Arc" has spread and advances alongside roads, often opened by illegal activities for exploitation of natural resources.

Understanding that the Tapajós basin is coveted territory for obsolete extractive development models, this publication sheds light on strategies for a sustainable development model widely used by traditional populations to preserve the Tapajós. Whether in the struggle for demarcation for indigenous lands of the Munduruku or in the campaign of riparian people to find alternative ways to obtain energy such as solar energy, all the strategies and detailed information in the publication culminate in a non-negotiable future for the Tapajós: its free flow, its waters clean and biodiversity preserved.

**Flávio Montiel**  
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