

Tapajós in Dispute: Indigenous Occupation Confronts the Logic of River Exploitation

Indigenous peoples of the Lower Tapajós occupy one of the main grain outflow ports in the Amazon to denounce dredging without environmental studies, lack of consultation and the transformation of the river into a logistics corridor for the export of commodities.

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Since Thursday, January 22, indigenous peoples of the lower Tapajós have been occupying the port of the U.S. multinational Cargill, in Santarém, in western Pará. The mobilization takes place at a strategic point in the logistics of grain exports from the Amazon and targets two recent decisions by the federal government: Decree No. 12,600/2025, which included Amazonian waterways in the National Privatization Plan (PND), and the launch of a R\$ 74.8 million public notice for the dredging of the Tapajós River between Santarém and Itaituba.

The indigenous presence interrupts the routine of one of the main grain outflow points in the region and transforms the port, which was built on top of a sacred territory for the peoples of the lower Tapajós, into the stage of a larger dispute: the future of the Tapajós River and the right to decide on it.

On the other hand, the federal government justifies dredging as a response to extreme droughts and the need to ensure "logistical efficiency." The argument, however, comes up against a historical and traditional fact: the Tapajós never needed to be dredged to guarantee navigation, artisanal fishing or the subsistence of the riverside and urban indigenous populations of Santarém, Belterra, Aveiro and Itaituba. Even in periods of more severe drought, the river has always been navigable for those who know and inhabit it. What has changed is not the Tapajós, but the way it has come to be used.

In the last decade, with the paving of the BR-163 highway and the installation of large ports in Miritituba, the Tapajós was incorporated once and for all into the international soybean route. Today, companies such as Cargill, Bunge, Louis Dreyfus and Hidrovias do Brasil concentrate the traffic of more than 100 barges and about 15 pushers on the river. The dredging provided for in the public notice does not respond to the climate crisis, but to ensure that the flow of exports is not interrupted even during the drought.

It is in this context that, on December 23, 2025, the Ministry of Ports and Airports, through DNIT, published the public notice of R\$ 74.8 million for the dredging of the Tapajós for five years. The amount almost doubles the previous emergency dredging contract. More serious than the amount, however, is the way in which the process progresses. The documents of the public notice themselves admit that the environmental studies must still be contracted. It is a serious inversion of the legal rite: first the work is planned and lawful; then its impacts are evaluated.

The correct legal rite should follow the opposite path. Before any bidding or contracting of works, the State is obliged to carry out complete technical and environmental studies, including the Environmental Impact Study and the Environmental Impact Report (EIA/RIMA), with wide publicity and social participation. These studies should support environmental licensing and guide decision-making on the feasibility of the project, they are not a bureaucratic formality, but a condition to decide whether or not the work can exist.

In the case of the Tapajós, this process is even more sensitive because it involves, mandatorily, the realization of Free, Prior and Informed Consultation with indigenous peoples and traditional communities, as established by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), to which

Brazil is a signatory. The consultation must take place before any administrative decision, respecting the times, protocols and forms of organization proper to the peoples.

None of this happened.

Therefore, at the center of the complaints is the violation of the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consultation, guaranteed by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO). There is no public record that indigenous peoples and traditional communities have been consulted about a project that profoundly alters the river on which they depend for their livelihood.

The impacts of dredging are deep, cumulative and go far beyond removing sand from the bed. The intervention can alter the natural dynamics of the Tapajós River, resuspend sediments contaminated by mercury, compromise water quality and directly affect artisanal fishing. The removal of algae and organisms from the bottom of the river reaches the base of the aquatic food chain and has direct effects on the food security of thousands of families. There are also plans for dredging in environmentally sensitive areas, such as the Tapajós National Forest and the Tapajós-Arapiuns Extractive Reserve.

These impacts are in addition to pressures already known by the river's populations: private ports built without proper licensing, intensive use of pesticides in the areas of influence of the BR-163, dam projects, mercury contamination, and the worsening of droughts associated with the climate crisis.

It is in the face of this accumulation of violations that the occupation of Cargill's port gains political centrality. The mobilization exposes the contradiction of a government that, while presenting itself internationally as an environmental leader and promising institutional dialogues, advances with decrees and edicts that favor large companies and weaken territorial rights.

The promise of dialogue, however, does not stand up to the facts. During the Climate Summit, the Minister of the General Secretariat of the Presidency, Guilherme Boulos, publicly stated that the federal government has committed to carrying out Free, Prior and Informed Consultation on the Tapajós River before any intervention and to creating a dialogue table with the peoples of the region. He even said he had discussed the issue by phone with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the Minister of the Civil House.

About a month after this declaration, the Ministry of Ports and Airports, through the DNIT, published the public notice of R\$ 74.8 million for the dredging of the Tapajós. The launch took place without the consultation having been carried out, without a regular environmental license and without the conclusion of the impact studies. In practice, the consultation announced as a precondition did not materialize before the administrative decision. The promised dialogue remained in the field of intentions, while the bidding process advanced.

The action of the peoples of the Lower Tapajós is not born of improvisation. It is the result of a long history of resistance to projects imposed without listening. By occupying one of the main logistical nodes for the export of grains from the Amazon, the protesters interrupt the logic that transforms the river into a mere export corridor and put an important question at the center of the debate: Who decides the fate of the Tapajós?

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MOVIMENTO TAPAJÓS VIVO

