



***“AT FIRST I THOUGHT I  
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NOW I REALISE I AM  
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*Chico Mendes (1944-88)*

# WE ARE ALL AMAZON

## Think piece

### Acre study tour: reducing emissions

4-8 July 2016

It's no wonder that the Amazon has been the inspiration for so many novels and films. The vast, untamed forest is the perfect setting to awaken the spirit of adventure, while indigenous tribes, forest dwellers, gold diggers and frontier cowboys provide a colourful cast of characters.

But a good story need more than just a magnificent setting. We need conflict. There is no drama without conflict – and the state of Acre has seen more than enough over the last 150 years.

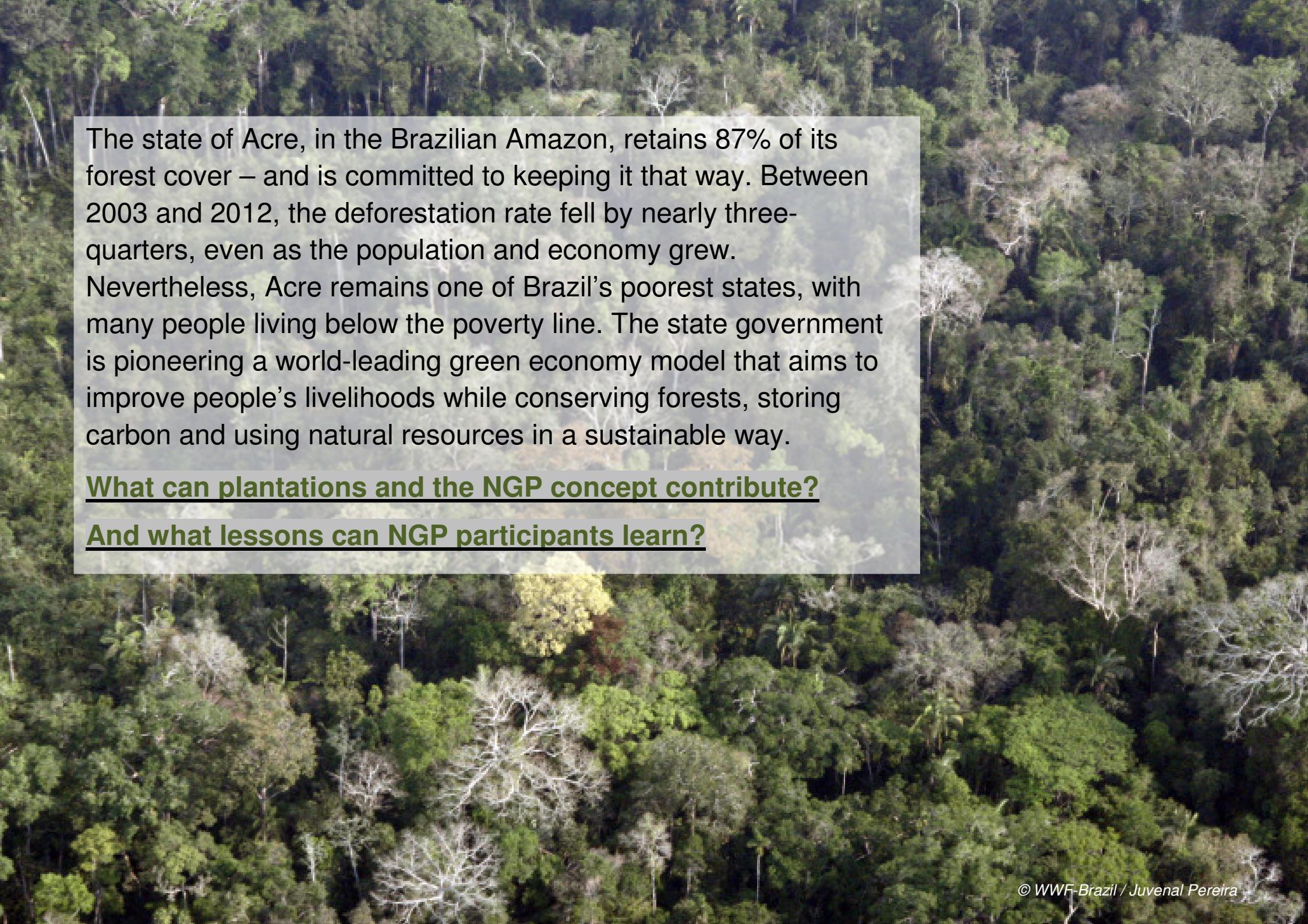
Even today, the competing objectives of economic development and environmental conservation need to be reconciled. And that provides the plot of our current drama: Acre's government and partners are working to improve people's livelihoods while conserving forests, to meet local needs while contributing to national commitments and global targets on climate change and sustainable development. This demands collaboration with multiple actors from different backgrounds and with different understandings and beliefs.



Of course, the greatest stories have a universal appeal. In our story, that's summed up by a famous quote from one of its heroes, the rubber tapper and rainforest campaigner Chico Mendes: "At first I thought I was fighting to save rubber trees. Then I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I realise I am fighting for humanity." This is a struggle that we should all care about – because it affects us all.

During our study tour to Acre, we'll be discovering the details of the story, exploring the setting, meeting many characters and seeing how the plot might unfold. We invite you to apply the lessons and successes of the Acre experience to your specific context.

But we don't want you to be a mere spectator: you too have a role to play. The study tour participants come from different sectors and different countries nationalities, but we all share the same challenges. And in Acre, we'll be asking you to mobilize all your knowledge and ideas so that, together, we can work towards a happy ending.



The state of Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon, retains 87% of its forest cover – and is committed to keeping it that way. Between 2003 and 2012, the deforestation rate fell by nearly three-quarters, even as the population and economy grew.

Nevertheless, Acre remains one of Brazil's poorest states, with many people living below the poverty line. The state government is pioneering a world-leading green economy model that aims to improve people's livelihoods while conserving forests, storing carbon and using natural resources in a sustainable way.

**What can plantations and the NGP concept contribute?**

**And what lessons can NGP participants learn?**

## **Acre and its people**

Acre lies deep in the Amazon in northwest Brazil, bordering Bolivia and Peru. It occupies an area of 164,221km<sup>2</sup> – a little larger than England and Wales – and has a population of just over 800,000, nearly half of whom live in the capital, Rio Branco.

Indigenous peoples have inhabited the dense forests of Acre for generations, but it wasn't until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the first European settlers began moving into the region. They were drawn by a product of the forest: the latex of the Pará rubber tree, a native Amazonian species widespread in Acre.

Rubber was a commodity in huge demand globally, particularly with the invention of the motor car, and entrepreneurs and migrant workers poured into the region. The Brazilian government encouraged peasant farmers from the drought-stricken north-east to move to the Amazon region – some 100,000 arrived following the drought of 1877.

While the “rubber barons” made vast fortunes, migrant workers were poorly treated – and the indigenous inhabitants paid a heavy price. Many thousands of Amerindians who had previously had little contact with the outside world were enslaved to work as rubber tappers. They suffered horrific abuses, and many succumbed to diseases brought by the settlers.

Around 90% of Acre's indigenous population was wiped out. Small wonder, then, that a number of their descendants choose to live in isolation: Acre is home to some of the last uncontacted tribes in the world – thought to number around 600 people. The state's total indigenous population is around 18,000, belonging to 15 ethnic groups.

## **Boom to bust to boom**

Plantations brought about the downfall of the Amazon rubber industry. The British planted rubber trees in their colonies in South East Asia, and these could supply latex more cheaply and efficiently than the wild rubber trees of the Amazon rainforest. By the beginning of World War One, the Amazon rubber boom was over. Although there were several attempts to establish large-scale rubber plantations in the Amazon, notably by Henry Ford in the 1920s, all failed due to the Pará tree's susceptibility to South American leaf blight, a fungal disease that prevents the trees reaching maturity.

But when Asian plantations fell into the hands of the Japanese during World War Two, the Allies turned to the Amazon for vital rubber supplies. The Brazilian government recruited more than 50,000 volunteers from the north-east to work as rubber tappers in the Amazon, with the promise of riches and a hero's welcome on their return.

In reality, like the indigenous people half a century earlier, these “rubber soldiers” were forced to work long hours for little or no pay. About 30,000 died of tropical diseases, or from snake bites and attacks by wild animals. Only around 6,000 made it home after the war; today, survivors are still fighting for proper compensation.

Those who remained were left to fend for themselves. Some moved to the cities, while others struggled to make a living tapping rubber. Raw latex fetched little money, particularly since synthetic rubber now dominated the market. They supplemented their livelihoods collecting Brazil nuts, and through hunting and subsistence farming.

## Chico Mendes and the “government of the forest”

During the 1970s, the Brazilian government opened up the Amazon to development. Cattle ranchers from the south cleared large areas of forest, particularly the old rubber estates. Many rubber tappers were forcibly evicted from the land that had become their home.

Under the leadership of Chico Mendes, the rubber tappers launched a peaceful resistance. They campaigned for their lands to be recognized as extractive reserves where they could continue to sustainably harvest rubber, Brazil nuts and other forest products. Their movement gained international attention, alerting the world to deforestation in the Amazon.

In 1988, Chico Mendes was assassinated outside his home by three cattle ranchers whose logging plans he had opposed. But his legacy lived on, and a decade later the Workers' Party, which he had co-founded, swept to power in Acre. The “government of the forest”, as it became known, was elected on a platform of supporting development while protecting the forest.

From 2001 to 2010, Acre's GDP grew 6% per year (the Brazilian average was 4.9%), while the deforestation rate has fallen by 55% over the past decade. Protected areas – including indigenous territories and extractive reserves – now cover almost half the state.

A system of “economic and ecological zoning” promotes economic activities in already deforested areas, while supporting sustainable forest management and harvesting of non-timber forest products within the forest.



*Harvesting rubber (above) and Brazil nuts in extractive reserves in Acre  
© Rubens Matsushita/ICMBio (above) and WWF-Brazil / Juvenal Pereira*

## Towards a green economy

Despite the progress over the last two decades, development in Acre remains a big challenge. The state's GDP per capita was US\$6,494 in 2012 – less than 60% of the national average. Over 40% of the population live below the poverty line, and 15% cannot read or write. For the rural poor, clearing areas of forest for cattle and crops remains a strong temptation.

The challenge for Acre is to ensure the forest is worth more standing than chopped down. Along with partners including WWF, the government is running various initiatives to add value to the forest-based economy. For example, a condom factory has been set up in the town of Xapuri to supply Brazil's family planning programme and combat sexually transmitted diseases, using rubber from the Chico Mendes extractive reserve. Villagers have been given training and equipment to process the latex they harvest, meaning they can sell it for a higher price. Market links have been formed with artisans and companies keen to sell shoes, accessories and other products made from wild rubber.

Meanwhile, government policies encourage sustainable land uses and livelihoods compatible with forest conservation, such as growing fruit and vegetables, fishing, and farming fish and poultry.

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*Top: The Natex factory in Xapuri produces 100 million wild rubber condoms each year for the Brazilian government's family planning programme.*

*Bottom: Amazonian rubber shoes, handmade by Acre-based artisan 'Doutor da Borracha' - Master of the Rubber.*

## **PES to REDD+**

To supplement these efforts, in 2010 Acre introduced its Environmental Service Incentives System (SISA). The scheme rewards smallholders, indigenous communities and other landowners for conserving their forests and the services – such as carbon storage, water supply, soil stabilization and biodiversity – that they provide. They receive benefits through governmental programmes, equipment and training to support sustainable land use and alternative livelihoods.

These initiatives have received a boost with the advent of REDD+, the scheme developed through the United Nations climate change process to provide incentives for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing tropical forest countries. Acre now has arguably the most advanced jurisdictional (state-wide) REDD+ programme in the world, and has secured over R\$100 million (~ US\$30 million) in funding.

A benefit sharing model, in place since 2013, distributes REDD+ funding from the German Development Bank KfW in return for validated emissions reductions. More than 70% of the funds are invested in the beneficiary communities, with the rest being used to strengthen the capacity of the SISA and REDD+ programme. Benefits are shared roughly equally between communities that conserve forest, such as indigenous and extractivist associations, and organizations of small farmers and livestock ranchers that contribute to reducing deforestation.

However, REDD+ and PES are contentious topics. Some critics argue that REDD+ is a false solution to climate change. They see it as a form of neo-colonialism, allowing rich countries in the North to continue burning fossil fuels while shifting responsibility to the global South.

Some indigenous groups and civil society organizations in Acre actively oppose REDD+. While attempts have been made to involve indigenous peoples and local communities in developing the programme and implementing social and environmental safeguards, some say they have not been properly consulted and that REDD+ will negatively affect their way of life.

Finding a peaceful and equitable resolution to these conflicts is essential if Acre is to truly deliver on the promise of green development for all.

## What can NGP contribute?

The Acre state government has been participating in the New Generation Plantations platform since 2012. It sees plantations that follow NGP principles as a promising sector for building the state's green economy. These include plantations of rubber trees, other native species such as acai palms, and non-native species including eucalyptus for timber.

During this first NGP study tour to Acre, we'll be looking at how the NGP concept can support sustainable, low-carbon development in Acre, and what we can learn from each other.

### Ecosystem integrity

How do we create **integrated landscapes** of native forest, planted forest, environmental services and other land uses?

What tools and principles of **sustainable intensification** can support increased production in already deforested areas, while preserving natural forest?

### High conservation values

What are Acre's **high conservation values**?

What are the opportunities for plantations to contribute to **protecting and enhancing** them?

### Stakeholder involvement

What can the NGP platform learn from Acre's experience of **government leadership and involving indigenous communities**?

How can we use the ongoing **multi-stakeholder platforms** (Coalizão Brasil Clima, Florestas e Agricultura, Diálogo Florestal, NGP...) to help resolve conflicts past and present in Acre?

### Economic growth

How can plantations contribute to **green economic growth** in Acre?

How can mechanisms such as Acre's REDD+ and payments for environmental services programme **create shared value** for local people?