First greening of Brazil

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The Burning Season. The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest. By Andrew Revkin. Houghton Mifflin: 1990. Pp. 317. \$19.95. Published in the United Kingdom by Collins. Hbk £16, pbk £9.99.

CHICO Mendes was gunned down in the backyard of his home in the little Amazonian town of Xapuri just a couple of days before Christmas in 1988. He was on his way to wash in the bathhouse, towel over one shoulder, when he was hit by a shotgun blast. He staggered back into his house, where his two guards, his wife Ilzamar and his two small children were waiting, and died.

Andrew Revkin begins his tale with this murder, but the book is not out to solve a mystery. The murderers are known and, as the local Xapuri prosecutor later put it, "The fact is, everybody knew Chico Mendes was going to be killed sooner or later." Revkin's tale is a deeper one, of how Mendes came to be at this place at this time — the story of the personal transformations that took him from his childhood in a poor, uneducated rubber-tapping family, to his final years as an international spokesman for the preservation of the rainforest.

That transformation was never quite complete. Although his murder provoked an immediate international outcry and more than 1,000 people reached Xapuri in time for his funeral (no mean feat, as it is a twelve-hour air and road journey even from São Paulo), people in Xapuri still saw him not as the international figure he had become, but as the union leader he had been, fighting for the rights of poor rubber tappers. The attention paid to his death was not fully comprehensible: "Even when Jesus Christ died, there wasn't as much publicity," complained Sebastiao Alves da Silva, the patriarch of the Alves clan that is alleged to have carried out the murder. After all, Mendes was the forty-ninth rural activist to be killed in the Amazon that year.

Two things had made Mendes special to those in the developed world. First, he was Brazilian, and allies within Brazil for the environmental movement were in short supply. The second, and more enduring reason, was that the idea of the "extractive reserve" grew out of Mendes' experience as a rubber tapper. The traditional life of the rubber tapper — harvesting latex and Brazil nuts from several hundred hectares of land — did little harm to the forest. As a union leader, Mendes' first priority was to protect these peoples' livelihood from cattle ranchers. But as an environmentalist, Mendes saw their way of life in a more general equation — that it is rational to save the rainforest because it will be worth more if it can be harvested sustainably. That idea was quickly to seize the

imagination of the people in the developed countries, combining as it did both the romance of a life lived in harmony with nature, and the comfortable thought that conservation could be the best way to turn a profit — ecology could almost be a branch of economics. But much had to happen before Mendes found himself in Washington, describing the benefits of extractive reserves to congressmen.

Revkin tells us how the first of Mendes'

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Chico Mendes' widow outside her house in Brazil.

transformations came as a boy. His family, like that of the other rubber trappers, was trapped by debt, by the constant need to repay the "advances" they received from middlemen who controlled the rubber trade. Into this unchanging world came Euclides Fernandes Távora, university-educated and a communist, who had escaped from an island penal colony.

Through Távora, Mendes learnt to read newspapers (there were no schools) and to understand the politics of the left. By the 1960s, he was working with the newly emerging unions, fighting debt slavery. A decade later it was the new enemy, the road cutting through the jungle from Rondonia that brought with it the cattle ranchers and hired gunmen sent in to "clean" the forest.

Revkin tells a fine tale of meetings with remarkable men and women, as Mendes emerges first as a national union leader and, soon after, as an international spokesman. The now standard chapters on the diversity of the rainforest and the global consequences of its destruction are

there too, but what puts the book in a category of excellence of its own is that it sees the problem of the Amazon as also the problem of the people who live and work in the Amazon.

By a miracle of publishing, Revkin's book finishes with events as recent as March 1990, fifteen months after Mendes' death. Mendes' murderers have still not been convicted but two important things have happened. First, Brazil has a new president in Fernando Collor de Mello, and a new secretary of the environment in José Lutzenberger, the country's most outspoken conservationist and an old friend of Mendes. Second, several large areas of forest have been designated as extractive reserves.

Both are successes that Mendes helped set in motion. But a big question remains over the long-term fate of Mendes' rubber tappers and the idea of extractive reserves. In passing, Revkin twice mentions that the price of rubber in Brazil is kept artificially high. He explains that native rubber collecting was almost wiped out at the beginning of the century when the British set up vast plantations in Malaysia, free from the the pests that made them impossible to manage in Brazil. But Revkin does not go on to ask what this really means.

Unfortunately, the long-term outlook for extractive reserves is not good. Despite attempts to increase the number of products that can be harvested, extractive reserves seem unlikely ever to provide more than a subsistence income. Just as with rubber, if any plant is found to be especially profitable, then someone will find a way of cultivating it intensively. As Brazil develops — or if subsidies are removed — the way of life of the rubber tappers that Mendes fought so hard to protect may pass into history. The difference Mendes made, though, is that he contributed enormously to the first greening of Brazil's politics and he gave the rubber tappers a chance, through the new extractive reserves, to decide their own fate. □

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■ *The World is Burning. Murder in the Rainforest — The Tragedy of Chico Mendes*, by Alex Shoumatoff, will be published in October by Chatto & Windus, price £15.

■ *Dam the Rivers, Damn the People*, a new Earthscan/WWF paperback by Barbara J. Cummings, is about development and resistance in Amazonian Brazil. Price is £5.95. Another new Earthscan paperback is *Our Common Seas: Coasts in Crisis*, in which Don Hinrichsen analyses the ecosystems being destroyed by industrial pollution. Price is £6.95.

■ *The Times Guide to the Environment* is published today. The author, Struan Simpson, aims to provide a comprehensive handbook to 'green' issues. Price for this paperback is £7.95. □