

## Feature Story

8D

### SERRA DA MANTIQUEIRA: THE BATTLE FOR PRESERVATION

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Photos by Euler Cássia*

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), is supporting Brazilian non-governmental organizations in their fight to protect the Serra da Mantiqueira, one of Brazil's most beautiful and most threatened mountain ranges.

Less than four hours Southwest of urban Rio de Janeiro, the 408,000 hectares of the Serra da Mantiqueira stretch over 25 municipalities in the southeastern Brazilian states of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro. This mountain range is one of the largest conservation areas in Brazil. It was established as an official Environmental Protection Area (EPA) by decree, in 1985, but so far very little has been done to ensure the actual preservation of the alpine ecosystem.

The area is occupied by continually growing lumber mills, cattle ranches, and mining companies. Despite slow government action, pressure from the militant 11-member non-governmental organization nucleus \_ the Mantiqueira Environmental Protection Area Defense Front (Fedapam), obtained good results this year: in its national environmental plan, the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama), allocated \$980,000 dollars, from a World Bank environmental loan to the Mantiqueira EPA.

"The key is to get public support in this cause," said Peter Susemihl, a businessman who coordinates Fedapam in all three states. Susemihl himself lives inside the EPA, in the Santo Antonio do Rio Doce district, in Minas Gerais.

Susemihl said that the government project is weak and that funds for the project are subject to fiscal control. "The public needs to be heard in a pioneer project like this \_ it would help create other environmental protection areas in the country," he said.

Architect José Pedro de Oliveira Costa, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the Serra da Mantiqueira, is also one of the founders of Fedapam. He said environmentalists want the government to "comply with its part, since the reserve has existed since 1985 and nothing has ever been done to preserve it."

## *Feature Story*

8D

"If funds were lacking before, then now is the time for the government to make the EPA official," he said.

Before any of the World Bank money is used in the region, Fedapam wants to zone the Mantiqueira EPA, so as to ensure the viability of projects in the region. "Fedapam's objective is to alert people about the importance of the region," said Fedapam general-secretary Marcelo Antoniazzi.

According to the environmentalist, in the last 30 years, most of the native pine trees (*Araucaria angustifolia*) and other prime types of lumber were extracted by loggers due to the lack of fiscalization.

Fedapam has already diagnosed what ails the region. The "mantiqueira report," a 55-page document compiled with WWF's support, warned that 25 percent of the land in the region has been lost to erosion. The report blamed "archaic agricultural methods, predatory tourism, unorganized urbanization and unrestrained exploration of natural resources" for the destruction.

The Itatiaia National Park, located on the tri-state intersection of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and São Paulo is the most threatened. The territory, formed by the Serra da Mantiqueira and part of the Serra do Mar (southeastern seaboard mountain range, covered by the Atlantic rain forest), is one of the largest conservation areas in South America, with 30,000 hectares.

The park is a paradise for nature lovers and hikers. There are crystalline waterfalls, cliffs, and a variety of mixed Atlantic rain forest and deciduous vegetation which draws tourists from all over the country. A rich variety of bird species is still present in the region, although mammals such as the maned wold (*Chrysoyon brachyurus*), the bushy-tailed anteater (*Mymercophaga tridactyla*), and the tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) have disappeared.

Deforestation by loggers and cattle ranchers, who burn native forest and use it for pastureland, poses the greatest threat to the region. Conflicts between environmentalists and these groups are common. One of the better-known cases involves the owner of a lumber mill, Oscar Diniz, who is fighting in court "his right to destroy pine lumber (*Araucaria angustifolia*)," protected by a federal law.

Other accusations involve the slaughter of hundreds of deer and parrots. Fedapam also claims two quartzite and graphite mining companies are responsible for the pollution of several rivers in the EPA.

## *Feature Story*

8D

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### **Parks and field stations**

In 1980, more than 300,000 people lived in the 25 municipalities inside the Mantiqueira EPA. Despite land occupation, tri-state governments were able to separate six conservation units in the region, including parks and field stations. Some of the units are still in the beginning stages of development, without infrastructure or supervision.

The largest conservation unit is Itatiaia, with 30,000 hectares. It was created in 1937. Itatiaia has the highest rocky massif found in southwestern South America, Pico das Agulhas Negras, 2,787 meters high. With an extremely varied ecosystem, from the pluvial Atlantic rain forest to rupestral fields, the park is home to species considered extinct, such as the jaguar (*Felis concolor*).

Another protected forest is the Campos do Jordão Park, in São Paulo. Only 180 kilometers from São Paulo, South America's largest city with 17 million inhabitants, this 3,000 hectare area receives an average 150,000 visitors yearly.

### **A difficult struggle**

The battle to keep the Mantiqueira region from complete devastation has its rewards. Most important in the movement, the necessity to encourage local inhabitants to respect their natural surroundings showed at least one result: 29-year-old Geraldo Nunes Soares, once a logger and cattle rancher, sold everything and opened a bar to support the movement and his family.

"There were many fights and the local people had trouble welcoming strangers," said Soares, "Now almost everyone accepts the situation and whoever cuts down the trees is denounced and made to pay a fine." Soares preferred to set up his own bar "frequented by locals and visitors," to paying the fines.

In his bar, Soares does not sell anything from cans. "A lot of people pollute the rivers with them," he said. The bar owner admits that he is an isolated case, however. "There are still those who cut and burn the forest to make room for pastureland," he said.