

Earthkeeper Hero: Chico Mendes

Jeff Trussell

Saving the planets' rain forests has become one of the world's most popular environmental causes. People from all walks of life have given selflessly of their time and money to help fund projects that teach people how to use the resources the rain forests have to offer without destroying them in the process.

One person, however, made the supreme sacrifice for this worthy cause. His name was Chico Mendes, and on December 22, 1988 he was killed while trying to save his beloved Amazon from destruction.

Born on December 15, 1944 in Ecuador, Mr. Mendes grew up in a family of rubber tappers (also known as seringueiros). Families in the Amazon have practiced rubber tapping for generations. It is a process whereby one harmlessly extracts sap from rubber trees, which is then used in such products as car tires and Tupperware. Rubber tapping is one of the many ways in which the resources of the Amazon are exploited without permanently harming the ecosystem. It is a sustainable agricultural system and Chico Mendes followed in his father's footsteps in becoming a seringueiro.

Unfortunately, not everyone is interested in sustainable use of the Amazon. For the cattle ranchers and mining interests in Brazil, sustainable agriculture represents an impediment to profits. Tearing down the forest as fast as possible and replacing it with pastureland and strip mines can make much money. Sadly, what is left behind after the ranchers and miners leave with their profits is usually nothing more than a shattered wasteland, a ruined desert where once stood a forest more than 180 million years old.

Mr. Mendes fought courageously to oppose the destructive practices of such large companies and individuals. He advocated a return to sustainable agricultural systems and urged his fellow Brazilians to protest nonviolently against corporations that would rob them of their livelihoods.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Mendes encountered a great deal of opposition from industrialists and corrupt government officials who were profiting from the tearing down of the Amazon. He was jailed and fined and threatened, but nothing could deter him from his mission to save his beloved jungle. And when he was killed in 1988 on the order of a rancher named Alves de Silva, the power of his grass roots movement only increased.

The international outcry against Chico Mendes' death was deafening. It marked a turning point in the fight to save the Amazon. Suddenly, a human face had been put on the cause to save the rain forests and money and support from all over the world poured in to help complete the good work that Chico had started. The plight of the seringueiro has become an international cause and many far-reaching reforms have been enacted since his death to insure the future of this eco-friendly industry.

Chico Mendes is not just a hero of the Amazon; he is a hero of the entire planet. The burning of the Amazon is a burning that impacts every forest and city and village on Earth. The fires that Chico Mendes fought to put out threatened more than just a few strange and exotic locations thousands of miles away. On a planet where the giant chain of life stretches from continent to continent, the flames of their endless burning continue to lick at the very edges of our own homes and backyards.