



Açaí Berry: Brazil's Super Fruit

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At the mouth of the Amazon River is the Bailique archipelago, consisting of eight islands, seven of which are inhabited by approximately 51 communities, whose population rely on the activities of fishing and extraction of forest products for their livelihood. Historically, the açai berry has been the main trade of the Bailique communities (Fig.1). This case study is about how they successfully received Forest Stewardship Certification (FSC), making it the first in the world to receive this certification, guaranteeing not only the quality of their product but also its social and environmental sustainability.

Known as the super-food of Brazil, the açai is packed with powerful antioxidants that may protect cells from damage and may possibly help against diseases such as heart disease and cancer. The inch-long, reddish-purple fruit is also popularly known as an anti-aging agent and helping with weight loss.

The Bailique communities wanted to be the protagonist of their own development, and they designed a strategy for improving their wellbeing and quality of life. They were supported by Oficina Escola de Luteria da Amazônia (OELA)

and the Grupo de Trabalho de Amazônico (OELA), which are two NGOs that work in the Brazilian Amazon region. Thus, along with the traditional people, in 2013, the Bailique Community Protocol was put in place. This Community Protocol is an instrument for sustainable management of the territory and its natural resources, and a tool for local empowerment. The protocol contains the local norms and guidelines on decision making, thereby being a working document that can facilitate the dialogue between the community and any external actor, diminishing the power difference between these two actors. The Bailique Community Protocol was the first of its kind in Brazil.

After 14 months of workshops, meetings and social mobilization, the Bailique communities concluded their Community Protocol and, it was in place by December 2014. Since then, the Bailique communities have been working to put into practice the collective decisions taken during the discussions of the protocol. It also helped in identification of land conflicts and partnering with government organizations to resolve issues. The community identified four products that they wanted to develop further and they are: the açai berry, essential oils, fish and medicinal plants. Furthermore, they all agreed to focus on the quality of local education for the sake of future generations. The Bailique Community Protocol helped in strengthening social cohesion and empowering the communities, resulting in the creation of the Association of the Bailique

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Fig. 1 The Amazon River bank with açai berry trees growing at the residence of a Bailique community member (photo by Laura Santos, Paulo Santos, Wendel Paixão, Geova Alves, Luis Fernando Iozzi)

Traditional Communities (ACTB) and the more recent Cooperative of Bailique Extractive Producers (AmazonBai).

Geová Alves is the president of the ACTB and he is part of the young generation of leaders who wants to bring change to their community (Fig. 2). He spearheaded the certification of the açai berry, the fruit that provided livelihoods to many in this community. The açai berry has historically been the main trade of the Bailique communities, however, producers are subjected to exploitation making it a barely viable activity. In December 2016, the AmazonBai was awarded Forest Stewardship Certification (FSC) for their açai berries.

The açai trade has historically been very important in the Bailique territory, but the producers have always depended on the ‘middle men’ to reach the markets, who usually put a very low price on their açai. The middle men collect the açai berries from the communities and take them to the city to be sold to local buyers, while dictating a very low price for the producers who collect the berry in the forest, says Geová.

The unfair prices fetched for the berries prompted Geová to act and after discussion with

his community members, they decided that the açai would be the focus of their activities. Hence, the producers who were part of the Protocol started to participate in workshops and meetings about good practice in the extraction of açai berries according to the norms of the FSC certification. It is important to note that the FSC norms are related to the quality and hygiene of the product but are also connected with social and environmental sustainability. As Geová explained:

The whole process of certification was a linking of the traditional knowledge of the producers on how to extract the berries according to their culture and the more technical knowledge brought by the FSC consultants on how to get the best berry possible.

It was indeed a very interesting process of negotiation between these two different worlds, where there was a conscious attempt to respect both modern and traditional knowledge. So, for instance, the producers learned about the need to wear boots for their protection when walking in the forest and also the need to avoid fruit contamination from the soil by using a plastic canvas to put the berries that were picked from the trees (Fig. 4). At the same time, the producers explained to the technicians that using a ‘safety



Fig. 2 President of the ACTB Geova Alves (photo by Laura Santos, Paulo Santos, Wendel Paixão, Geova Alves, Luis Fernando Iozzi)

belt' to climb the açai trees would not be possible as good climbers usually jump from the top of a tree to another in order to maximize climbing time and facilitate the extraction of berries, and the belt would be a hazard in this case (Fig. 3). In order to guarantee safety when climbing, they agreed to select the tall and weak trees that should be cut down, allowing for more light into the forest, producing nutrients in the soil and removing a potential hazard for the climbers. For Geová, this was a special occasion that showed that local knowledge and scientific knowledge could work together for the common good.

The AmazonBai has 120 members from 30 different communities and now are organized and able to reach markets that will pay a better price for their açai. However, Geova highlights that the certification is not just an instrument to reach better markets and improve the income of producers, but it is part of a community strategy to implement an education system in their territory that will allow the younger generation to get good quality education in their communities, without the need to migrate to urban areas.

The Bailique archipelago is very far from the city of Macapa and we do not have a good school system in our territory that gives a good education

to young people. The students usually have to travel 12 hours on a boat to the city and then a couple of hours more on a bus to reach a good school. This is very expensive for us and is very difficult for the students who need to stay far away from their communities. Here we value the time we spend with the elderly because this is when we learn how to manage our land, and we learn about our culture and traditions. If a student stays far away from the forest for too long, he/she loses the link with their territory. So, the idea that we had during the discussion of the Community Protocol was to have a 'Family School' here in Bailique. In this way the kids would be able to stay much closer to their homes, learning from the national curriculum but at the same time learning skills which are important for life in the forest. And even better, they would have the chance to share that with their communities and learn from them, notes Geová Alves.

Family Schools are an education system that works with Alternation Pedagogy, where the student stays in the school for a set amount of time and then goes to the community to put in practice what was taught at school and at the same time learns the local traditions from the community. It is a school managed by the community and hence all decisions related to their education are taken collectively. It is an education system that respects the reality of the people



Fig. 3 Climbing the palms to collect the berries (photo by Laura Santos, Paulo Santos, Wenndel Paixão, Geova Alves, Luis Fernando Iozzi)

whose livelihoods depend on the forest and rivers.

Geová explains how the açai trade is relevant to the implementation of this school. The açai producers from the cooperative agreed that 5% of the sale of every basket of their certified açai berry will go to a fund created for investing in the future of the Bailique Family School. In this way the producers are helping the whole archipelago to fund a school in their territory.

The açai season of 2017 was a special one for the AmazonBai Cooperative as it was their first season of selling a certified product. It is still very early to make a full assessment of how the certification has the potential to improve the lives of these communities, but it is possible to look at some early examples. Before the creation of the cooperative, açai producers relied solely on the middlemen to buy their products, and had no control over the price. The trader's boats would stop at their community, collect the açai and would pay whatever traders felt was the value of the product. After certification, and with the creation of the cooperative, the producers started to have full control over their product and, could influence the prices as well as the market.

Prior to the certification, one açai basket (containing about 14 kg) would sell for

approximately R\$2500 (approximately US\$8). After the certification, the price doubled to R\$5000 (approximately US\$16). Although this is a considerably better price, the cooperative believes that they can get a better price for their açai, as they continue to negotiate with better buyers.

This price difference, nevertheless, has already made a significant difference in the lives of the cooperative members. Maely Lobato Martins, from the Jangada community in Bailique, is a young açai producer who sees the certification as a very important step for the community (Fig. 5). She explained how the extraction of the açai berry is a very intense labour activity, and yet the prices paid before certification were very low. She felt like she was always exploited, as the money paid for her production was just enough to pay for the expenses of extracting the berry, and there was nothing left for her family. For Maely, the creation of the cooperative and the certification are important achievements for the Bailique community, in particular, to end exploitation.

This feeling is shared by Maria do Ceo Lobato, who has been working in the açai trade for many years. She recognizes the importance of the cooperative, highlighting the important decision of the producers to use part of their



Fig. 4 Images of collection process of berries (photo by Laura Santos, Paulo Santos, Wendel Paixão, Geova Alves, Luis Fernando Iozzi)

revenue from the certified açaí to support the Family School in their territory. Also, for her, the cooperative has many advantages over the previous system of relying on middlemen.

The cooperative system is much better than using the middleman. Everything in the cooperative is put down on paper, everything is written down. The cooperative gives us a receipt for the transaction. The production of the cooperative is also very clean, there is no contamination from water or dogs. We have now a product of high value that is good for our health. And this is very important so

when we get to the external market, we are going to succeed, says Maria do Ceo Lobato.

Geová Alves explained that soon after the end of the 2017 açaí season he started to receive a lot of positive comments about the certification process and its outcome. He was happy to note that producers who were sceptical of the process at the beginning, were now interested in joining the cooperative. The Cooperative started with 75 certified producers, and in less than a year after its establishment. It now has 120 producers. These new



Fig. 5 Maely Lobato Martins (left) and Maria do Ceo Lobato (right) (photo by Laura Santos, Paulo Santos, Wendel Paixão, Geova Alves, Luis Fernando Iozzi)



Fig. 6 FSC workshop with the açai producers of Bailique (photo by Laura Santos, Paulo Santos, Wendel Paixão, Geova Alves, Luis Fernando Iozzi)

producers are now going through a series of trainings to receive FSC certification and join in for the next season of certified açai berries picking (Fig. 6).

Another direct outcome of the certification is that the açai from Bailique began to be viewed as a high quality product in the external market.

Whereas previously the Bailique archipelago was seen as producing a low quality açai, after the certification there was a general assumption that their açai was of better quality than most açai in the region. According to Geová, the interesting thing about this is that this spread over to the

whole territory, where even the non-certified producers were able to sell their açaí for a much better price than before. However, the plan of the Bailique cooperative is to go beyond the sale of the berry and increase its value by having their own industry (or finding a suitable partner) where the berry can be processed and transformed into final products such as juices or ice cream.

The long-term vision for this industry is to be able to produce a freeze-dried açaí powder, which will be a highly nutritious product and will allow them to access niche markets. Other than being a good source of revenue, the collective vision is that this açaí powder could be used in school meals in the region, giving the children the chance to have a nutritious meal using a local product.

The Bailique Cooperative is aware that this is part of their long term development project and one that will need strong external investment and business partners. Nevertheless, they are already doing some of the groundwork by preparing the young Bailique generation to be food technicians in this area. The Brazilian Ministry of Science,

Technology, Innovation and Communication is funding a Centre for Technological Vocation in the Bailique community, where local students are receiving technical education on Food Technology. This course started in February 2017 and there are currently 17 students enrolled from the Bailique communities. This course is focused on the socio-biodiversity of the region, mainly the açaí berry, and one of the aims is to train these students in the dry freeze technique. Therefore, the community is investing in the education of young people who can support the açaí industry in the future.

Our Community Protocol was the basis for everything we are achieving today. Through the protocol, we were able to organize, better understand our rights, understand our territory and develop a strategy that we believe is the best for our territory. It is the first time that we, as a community, have the chance to construct something that is truly relevant to us. We are not told what to do but we meet up and discuss collectively what is best for us. It was in this way that we decided about the açaí certification and the implementation of the Family School. I am happy to see that other communities want to become empowered as well, concludes Geová.