

Below is background information to the Xavante's protest:

Brazil's position as a major world soya exporter is having serious negative impacts on the indigenous peoples who inhabit Mato Grosso state. Brazil, a South American agricultural giant, trails only the United States as the world's leading exporter of soya. Mato Grosso state, an area of 901,420 Km², is Brazil's primary soya-producing region. Approximately 20,000 of the state's 2,498,150 inhabitants are indigenous. They represent 35 distinct ethnic peoples and reside in 67 separate Indigenous Territories (SEPLAN-MT/2000).



Banner reading, "The Rio das Mortes is Our Life", Xavante block BR-158 where it crosses the Rio das Mortes in Nova Xavantina, © Laura R. Graham

Members of the state's largest tribe, the Xavante (pronounced Shavante or Chavante), are now taking action to let the world know that they and their lands are currently suffering a series of negative impacts directly related to economic activities – specifically uncontrolled and rampant soya cultivation – in areas immediately adjacent to their territories.



The Xavante protest stops traffic across the Rio das Mortes Bridge for hours. © Laura R. Graham

On May 25, a group of Xavante stopped traffic on the BR-158 highway by blocking both sides of the bridge over the Rio das Mortes (a major Amazonian tributary) in Nova Xavantina, Mato Grosso. Their objective was to call attention to the degradation of the Rio das Mortes River Basin where four Xavante Indigenous Territories are located: Areões, Pimentel Barbosa, Sangradouro, São and Marcos. Their action paralyzed commerce on this major Amazonian artery for an entire day. Xavante allowed school busses, police and emergency medical vehicles free access to cross. As he waved through a private vehicle transporting a seriously ill patient to a hospital in a neighboring state one leader commented, "We understand your urgency completely. We don't have adequate medical cars in our territories either."

This demonstration marks the launching of Xavante Warã Association's national and international campaign to conserve and restore the Rio das Mortes River Basin. Xavante Warã Association is an indigenous non governmental organisation that, for the past ten years, has been implementing projects that promote Xavante autonomy and self-sufficiency through conservation of the cerrado (savannah) environment and Xavante knowledge of this unique ecosystem. The campaign seeks to protect lands and water sources that Xavante depend on for their physical and spiritual livelihood. The Association proposes an ecological corridor along the Rio das Mortes and its headwaters to protect water sources from agro toxins and deforestation associated with uncontrolled soya cultivation in the cerrado. Xavante leaders do not object to soya

cultivation in areas beyond the borders of their territories per se. They want agriculturalists to respect legislation that prevents soya plantation in areas that are immediately adjacent to indigenous territories and to stop deforestation of gallery forests near headwaters and along the Rio das Mortes river course and its tributaries. Xavante vehemently object to the dumping of agro toxins into the region's water systems.



Xavante man overlooking the Rio das Mortes
© David Hernandez

Brazil's prominence in the world soya market results from the recent massive increase in soya cultivation within Mato Grosso state. According to EMPAER-MT, in 1978, just over 5,000 hectares were dedicated to soy. By 2003, this area had increased exponentially, to over 5,000,000 hectares. In the period 1991-1994, the area dedicated to soya cultivation increased 81% and, in 1994, Mato Grosso's soya production (2.5 tons/hectare) exceeded the national average. In 2000, with an area of 2.906.448 hectares devoted to soya cultivation, Mato Grosso became Brazil's leading soya producing state. It also leads Brazilian states with the largest number of agricultural burnings and highest incidence of deforestation.

Federal and state policy favors this massive agricultural expansion. In 2004, Brazil's President Lula approved the use of Genetically Modified Foods (GMFs). Mato Grosso's state governor, Blairo Maggi, is a millionaire farmer whose Maggi Group is the world's largest soya producer. In Brazil, he is known in Brazil as 'O Rei da Soja' or 'the King of Soya'. To environmentalists he is, 'the King of Deforestation' (McCarthy, Michael and Buncombe, Andrew, The Independent [London], May 20, 2005).

Phenomenal environmental destruction accompanies soya's rapid and massive expansion. Soya cultivation is largely responsible for the loss of diversity in the cerrado (savannah) environment, a unique ecological niche that is extremely delicate and rich in biodiversity and which, in comparison with to other Amazonian environments, is relatively unknown. Soya cultivation, together with extensive cattle ranching and its associated large-scale deforestation, is damaging the region's river systems and the world's largest fresh water reserve, the Guarani Aquifer. Research carried out by the Brazilian agricultural research agency, EMBRAPA, concluded, 'Agriculture in Mato Grosso state is among the principle agents responsible for the contamination of . . . the Guarani aquifer'. (24horasnews, 22/08/2002). According to EMBRAPA's research, the level of contaminants from agro toxins in the Guarani Aquifer has reached 80% of the level permissible for human consumption.

In addition to negative environmental consequences, serious social costs also accompany soya's agricultural explosion in Mato Grosso. This is especially the case for the state's indigenous peoples and other traditional populations who depend on the Rio das Mortes river system for their livelihood. In addition to being a source of physical nourishment, the natural environment is fundamental to indigenous spiritual and ceremonial life. Numerous Xavante ceremonial activities, for example, rely on natural resources from the cerrado environment.

A decrease in flora and fauna, another principle consequence of the massive agricultural development in Mato Grosso state, poses serious challenges to the Xavante diet, as well as to the diets of other indigenous and traditional peoples, since a variety of nutritious cerrado foods are integral components of the Xavante diet. Further, cerrado foods and practices associated with their collection and processing are fundamental to Xavante identity and ceremonial life. Hunting and hunted game, for instance, are central to a majority of significant Xavante ceremonial activities such as weddings and to male initiation ceremonies.

The pollution of rivers whose headwaters lie outside the boundaries of Xavante Territories poses an immensely grave problem to contemporary Xavante communities. Xavante depend on rivers for drinking water and for bathing. Water is also fundamental to many

ritual practices. The increase in intensive agriculture and cattle raising has increased the presence of contaminants -- residues from soya cultivation in the form of toxic pesticides and fertilizers or from cattle raising in the form of wastes and herbicides applied to pastures - in waters that Xavante count on for their daily and spiritual activities.

By protecting the sources of waters that course their territories, the Xavante Warã Association proposes to protect the Xavante life ways for future Xavante generations and to conserve the Rio das Mortes River Basin and the cerrado environment for the benefit of all humanity.

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