

## Latin America / Brazil

### Conservation contradictions

*The marine extractive reserve (RESEX) model could have greater benefits for local communities, as compared to other conservation approaches. However, for this to happen, certain issues will need to be resolved.*

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Since 1989, Brazil has been experimenting with a novel and unique partnership in natural resource extraction and conservation, called “Reservas Extractivistas” or RESEX. This article is about the Ponta do Corumbau Marine Extractive Reserve (Corumbau RESEX), located on the Costa do Descobrimento, 800 km south of Salvador, the capital city of the State of Bahia, Brazil. The region is home to part of what remains of the Mata Atlântica—areas of mangroves and coral reefs recognized as a World Historical Site by UNESCO in 1999.

The Corumbau RESEX was established in September 2000, thanks to the initiatives of artisanal fishermen from nine different communities. The idea was to protect the region from predatory fishing by industrial fleets, whose operations were harming the shrimp stocks in the area.

The user rights to the resources have been guaranteed to the traditional extractive populations along the coast—484 registered members distributed between nine different communities, organized in three associations. The founding decree of the Corumbau RESEX states that it “aims at ensuring the sustainable exploitation and conservation of renewable natural resources traditionally used by the local extractive population.” Research institutions and government agencies, however, provide essential support for resource conservation and effective results.

Alpina Begossi’s work in the Amazon concluded that extractive reserves offer significant potential for political organization and improving environmental and social resilience, compared to other conservation approaches. This has, however, yet to be achieved in Corumbau.

In the case of the Corumbau RESEX, communities live in isolated conditions due to the poor state of the roads and bridges in the area, and due to the absence of electricity. This hinders the active participation of the local population in management and decision-making processes. Participation of women is also generally limited due to several difficulties, two key ones being motherhood and cultural traditions that make it difficult to both speak out at meetings and get a grasp of the issues being discussed.

The RESEX includes both the marine and the surrounding land area. However, it is only in the marine area that the extractive populations have user rights. They have no such rights in the surrounding land area where they live, and it is here that most of the social conflicts arise. Whilst the marine reserve is an area of common property protected by law, the land area is governed by commercial and private property laws, where economically stronger sectors, such as the hospitality and tourism industry, exert a considerable influence.

These interests are fuelling a growing speculation in real estate. RESEX community residents are being forced to sell their houses at very low prices, and move far away, where there is no infrastructure or government assistance of any kind. Also, due to the increasing privatization of access to, and use of, the coastal strip, access to the sea is becoming more difficult for communities. This is leading to a gradual cultural erosion, and the complete exclusion of fishing communities from areas near the coast.

A gender-focused participatory appraisal exercise (PAGP) was undertaken to promote the active participation of various interest groups, especially women, in the management of the RESEX, faced as they are with changes imposed by tourism. The PAGP techniques and tools used were those recommended by IUCN—the World Conservation Union.

This article focuses on the results of two of several PAGP workshops: *Rain of Dreams* and *What Hurts Most*. The former was designed to identify the main aspirations of men and women regarding improvements in their personal, community and environmental conditions. The latter aimed to identify critical problems, and to understand how they affect men and women in their personal, domestic and public lives.



Overall, 118 women and 17 men participated in the workshops. Although the limited presence of men constrained the possibility for comparative analysis, it highlighted the existence of power relations between men and women in the communities. The workshop discussions also highlight the differing priorities of women and men, with women more concerned about balancing their productive and reproductive roles. Women expressed concern about children's welfare, the absence of proper medical care in communities, and the lack of piped potable water. The "dreams" highlighted by the women were public daycare centres for children up to six years old, and job and income opportunities that could increase financial independence and their ability to support their families. Participants pointed out that job opportunities abound during tourist seasons, and were daycare centres available, many women could benefit.

The men wanted better working conditions, boat ownership and public transport services. In general, men's dreams related more to improved conditions for their productive activities.

Both men and women ranked lack of healthcare as a primary concern, followed by lack of education. School transport was a "dream" many fathers shared, since their children were attending day or night school in other villages. Women also explained how vulnerable they are to violence, expressed in a variety of ways and worsened by their financial dependence on men.

Both men and women pointed out that associations and other forms of community organizations were non-existent, and drew attention to the problems caused by the lack of local policies for housing, healthcare, water supply, employment creation, and so on. Women specifically mentioned other factors of distress, such as lack or loss of their own houses, non-existent water supply, grief caused by loss of family members through death or by separation imposed by distance, and by lack of family support.

We have used the word "community" advisably, as the power relations between different social groups make it difficult to consider the community as a cooperative and homogenous unit. Existing profound conflicts will probably only make themselves known over time, as the project progresses. However, there is no doubt that the workshops on "dreams" and "painful realities" at RESEX Corumbau have been able to pinpoint critical problems that have a bearing on the quality of life of communities, ranging from housing, education, electric power and water to personal happiness, despair, violence, and alcohol and drug abuse.

It is ironical, though, that it is precisely such "rusticity" that is a tourist attraction. The burden falls mainly on women, and performing daily activities under prevailing conditions is becoming increasingly difficult and strenuous. The construction of roads is another area that needs to be discussed. This is an issue on which local people and conservation organizations are in conflict due to the potential threat road construction represents to the area, as it could pave the way for mass tourism and for environmental and cultural damage.

The research has highlighted the contradictions that exist between establishing a conservation area to safeguard the marine ecosystem, and the interests and rights of the local inhabitants. The specific conservation measures required for the marine area also need to take account of the relationships between land and sea, and the complementary roles played by women and men in sustaining life and livelihoods.

Ensuring a balance between such a diversified and contradictory set of interests is a challenge that will have to be faced by those responsible for the development and management of the RESEX. To guarantee sustainability, it is particularly important that

rules are set to not only control tourism activities and the distribution of its benefits, but also to restrict the behaviour of other economic interests in the area—notably real estate speculation.

This must go hand-in-hand with ensuring the regular participation of the population in the RESEX administration, ensuring gender equity. This could help to empower the community through participatory management, raise the quality of life of the residents, and ensure their contribution to the conservation of ecosystem biodiversity.

(This article has been translated by Brian O’Riordan of ICSF’s Brussels office)

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