

Ceara fishermen

Sailing for a cause

A spirited campaign in the shape of a 76-day voyage of the S.O.S. Sobrevivencia highlighted the plight of the fishermen of Ceara, Brazil

The *jangadeiros*, fishermen of northeast Brazil who sail on small rafts, have had considerable impact on Brazil's history. In 1884, Ceara was the first Brazilian state to abolish slavery. Propelling this path breaking decision was a year-long protest by the *jangadeiros*, led by Francisco Jose do Nascimento, the 'Dragon of the Seas', who was the founder of the Liberation Society of Ceara.

At the time, Ceara, located in Brazil's airy northeast, was going through a severe drought which hit agriculture in the region. Not needing slaves, and to help pay their rising debts, the owners began selling their surplus slaves to the state of Pernambuco down the coast. The *jangadeiros*, with their handy *jangadas*, were needed to transfer the merchandise to the ships anchored out at sea.

No one reckoned with the high moral standards of the humble fishermen who had decided on their own that slavery was unjust. To demonstrate their will, the *jangadeiros* began a boycott with the historic phrase: "No porto do Ceara nao se embarcam mais escravos!" (No more slaves will embark from the ports of Ceara)

The *jangadeiros* held fast against threats by the Emperor and his military. To show their unity, the 'Dragao do Mar' even travelled by ship to Rio de Janeiro in 1884 with a gift for the Emperor Dom Pedro II: the *jangada* 'Liberty'. Even though the Emperor refused to see him, the trip was a political success for the abolitionists, as he was given a hero's welcome by the people of the capital.

In 1941, it was the turn of 'Jacare (the Alligator) to sail to Rio de Janeiro with three other fishermen from Fortaleza.

This time, the target was the Military Regime of Getulio Vargas, which was strongly supported by the US. The four men sailed 61 days on a raft made of six tree trunks to tell the President about the miserable working conditions of *jangadeiros* and their need to be included in the country's social security system.

The voyage caught the attention of the movie director, Orson Welles, who was in Brazil at the time making a film on Roosevelt's 'Good Neighbour Policy'. Welles was so captivated by the courage of the *jangadeiros* that he decided to make a film about their struggle instead, doing so against the wishes of the State Department, the Brazilian government, and his then employer, Rio. Rio fired Welles, who proceeded with the project only to experience tragedy.

While re-enacting the *jangadeiros* arrival in Rio, a large wave overturned their *jangada* and, before Welles' very eyes, Jacare was carried off by a wave and drowned. The film project was canned and only completed 52 years later, released by Paramount under the title, 'It's All True'.

Just as a film team was in Ceara for the final shooting of 'It's All True', a new protest movement came to life in the small community of Prainha do Canto Verde. Work had begun with the fishermen in 1991 to liberate them from a wicked network of intermediaries that was exploiting their hard and dangerous work and pocketing huge profits by buying their catches of fish and lobster at manipulated prices.

Fishermen's co-operative

After less than a year of working to establish the co-operative of the fishermen, it became clear that there were even greater evil forces at work to keep the

fishing communities in extreme poverty. Real estate speculators were busy buying up peach property using corruption and threats, while, at sea, a growing fleet of motor boats had started to capture ever-growing quantities of lobster using ill-equipped divers and capturing ever-smaller juvenile lobsters. (Both diving and catching juvenile lobsters are prohibited by fisheries regulations.)

The conflict between artisanal fishermen on their fragile *jangadas* and armed bandits on motor boats kept growing. The authorities failed to intervene and enforce regulations, even as four fishermen lost their lives from enemy fire at sea.

The adventurous dream of one young fisherman, Edilson, to sail to Rio de Janeiro, was probably inspired by 'Jacare' and his own grandfather, who together with two other fishermen from Prainha do Canto Verde, sailed to Belem, Para on a 14-day trip in 1928. The idea to unite the fishermen of various communities and supporting NGOs gave the trip the sense that it lacked. So, in three short months, the logistics for the trip and the protest campaign were planned and financed.

A week before the scheduled departure, the *jangada* and the crew were presented to the press at the fishing port of Fortaleza. They made the headlines of all the newspapers and TV stations, Taken by

surprise, the Captain of the Port Authority advised that the navy had overruled the authorization for the trip given by the captain responsible for the area of Prainha do Canto Verde, implying that the trip should not take place. But there was no way that the crew, the organizers or supporters of the protest trip would heed the advice.

On 4 April 1993, loaded with emotion, tears, encouragement and worries, fishermen from ports far away came in their *jangadas* to escort the S.O.S. Sobrevivencia on the first leg of the voyage. TV crews, photographers and reporters gave the simple fishermen a preview of what lay ahead of them; hundreds of interviews and TV talk shows on the more than 3,000 km that lay ahead of them.

Absent, as always when things get hot, were most of the representatives of the state, municipal and federal governments. But the speakers who wished the sailors well, were very clear about where the problem lay—the rich are above the law, and few people waste their time looking for justice for the poor.

On its way

Shortly after 12 noon that day, the fishers' favourite priest, Padre Marco, celebrated mass and christened the *jangada* to send it on its way, well protected by the One who Cares. The small craft was rolled down the

beach, while thousands of well-wishers, even the hardest fishermen among them, let tears flow. Edilson (Fonseca Fernandes), the Captain Mamede (Dantes de Lima), crew members Francisco (da Silva Valente) and Francisco (Abilio Pereira da Silva) were busy tacking the wooden mast to sail through the surf and gain the wide open sea, accompanied by *jangadas* from neighbouring communities, on the first leg of the trip.

The trip had been carefully planned by a small group of young fishery engineers from the local university and volunteers from NGOs working on issues of fishery, ecology and human rights. Twenty stops were planned along the coast of Brazil; contacts with a variety of groups, fishermen's colonies, women's and human rights groups and other movements were planned at each port. Press releases were ready to brief journalists on the scope of the trip and inform them about the great range of problems facing coastal communities all over Brazil.

While the men started to prepare for the unexpected, two young women were getting ready to follow the route in a small two-door Volkswagen. Loaded to the last square inch with pamphlets, background material, press releases, petition forms, S.O.S. hats and T-shirts to be sold to raise funds along the way, and

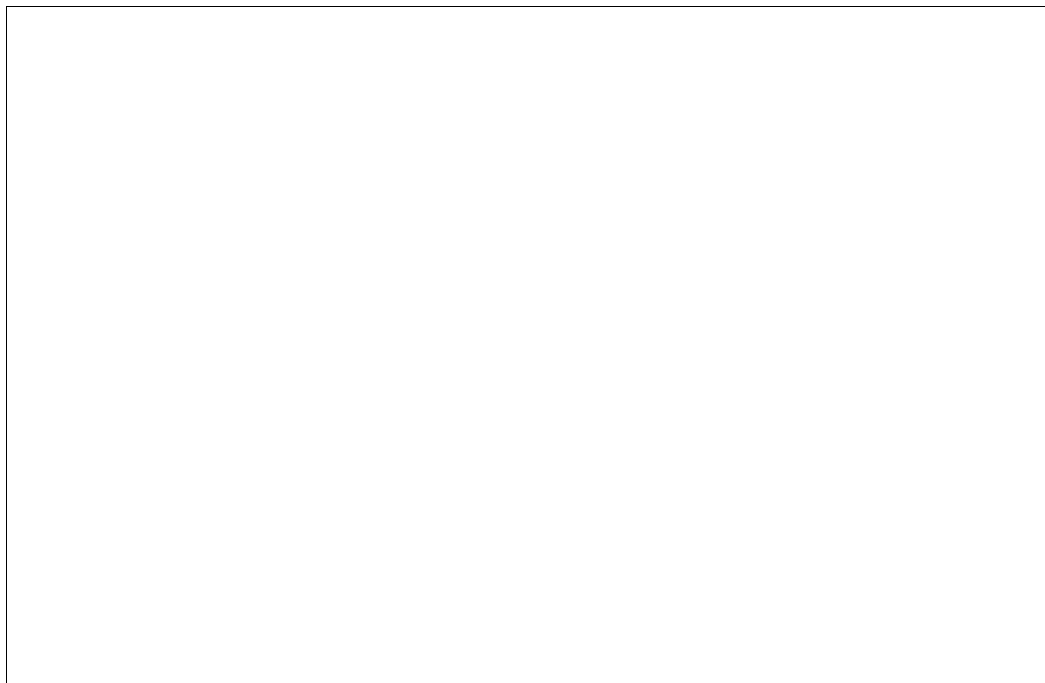
their own little belongings, they took off, after a three-day delay.

Michelle Scharer, who holds a degree in zoology from the University of Central Florida, had come down with fever on the day the trip was planned to start. Her travel companion was Marlene Fernandes de Lima, then president of the Villages Residents Association. Both were in their early twenties and faced a formidable challenge for the next two months, meeting the press, ensuring supplies for the *jangada*, organizing protest meetings and communicating with Operation Headquarters in Fortaleza. To fill the gap of three days, I went ahead to Redonda, Icapui, to meet the navigators and the members of the community and then drove to the third stop to organize local support, before heading back to hand over to the girls.

Back at Prainha, the courage of the crew and the girls rubbed off on the fishermen. On 6 April, they went on strike to protest against delayed payments and the low lobster prices offered by buyers. They went back to sea only when the price went up and the producers were paid in cash.

Storm at sea

The *jangadeiros* faced their first serious problem when they got caught in a 24-hour storm at sea. Used to facing many a storm during fishing, they weathered this one too.



Meanwhile, Michelle and Marlene had made contact with the Sisters of the Convent and the fishermen's representative in Toros, Rio Grande do Norte, unlikely allies who were fighting the local city hail which had sided with a foreigner who was terrorizing fishermen with armed guards against using 'his' beachfront property for landing their boats.

It was Holy Friday afternoon when, in the middle of the procession, Sister Aurea announced over the public address system, the arrival of the *jangada*. It was a great reception for four very tired fishermen, who had endured two sleepless nights, and also attended to Mamede, still running a high fever.

Although not fully recovered, they decided to sail on, after spending three days in this hospitable community and learning more about the local problems—it seemed just like home, full of real estate speculators and pirates diving after lobsters.

Natal was the first capital city on the next segment of their trip. They arrived there on 14 April and got the first taste of the hard life of celebrities—interviews with four TV stations, three local radios and four newspapers. The navy sergeant made up for his superiors when he told the crew that everybody at the port authority supported the trip. After a grand reception in Cabedelo in the State of Paraiba, complete with dazzling fireworks, a parade and a show organized by the local fishing co-operative, they headed for Pernambuco and the historical city of Olinda.

The girls arranged for a dentist's appointment to repair Edilson's root canal that had been bothering him for the last four days, while the *jangada* was working its way towards Olinda. The representative of the Fishermen's Pastoral arranged meetings with local groups and helped Michelle and Marlene collect signatures for the petition, and sell hats and T-shirts.

Then they went by sea and over dirt roads through the States of Alagoas and Sergipe, ahead to the country's largest coastal State, Bahia. The problems that were

discussed with the communities in different ports invariably turned to pollution of coastal areas and wetland from industry or sugar cane plantations. There were also problems relating to fishing by divers, trawlers or those using dynamite.

Another common problem was real estate speculation that drove fishermen's families from their homes and threw them back into the hinterland, in some cases forcing them to travel over two hours by bus to go to work, while earlier they used to live right beside their boats.

Exactly one month into the trip, the S.O.S. Sobrevivencia appeared over the horizon for a triumphant arrival in Salvador, Bahia, the city on the Bay of Saints. The crew got a hero's welcome at the Olodum in the historic centre of Salvador, where the world-renowned carnival takes place.

Olodum is not only the home of famous rhythm groups formed of kids who have come off the streets and regularly perform on tour in the us, Europe and Japan. Olodum is a social institution founded by blacks to help them win back pride in their origin. Street children get a chance to go to school, art and music clinics.

Tuesday just happened to be rehearsal day for Olodum and thousands of people had filled the club in historical Pelourinho. The six adventurers got a standing ovation from the crowd and the band beat the maximum volume out of the drums. That night it seemed that all the Negroes of Salvador were fishermen and all the fishermen of Brazil were black, two neglected groups of suffering people that need to recover their pride, unite and fight for their existence.

The captain of the port in Salvador was not so hospitable and required the *jangadeiros* to sign a waiver of responsibility to relieve the navy of any blame in case they should sink. But, on the whole, most of the captains along the route were gracious. Some even invited the crew for dinner at home and praised their courage and spirit.

Letter of praise

Ironically, we got a letter from the Public Relations Officer of the Minister of the Navy in Brasilia, commending us on the

initiative and offering any kind of support and assistance—perhaps a case of what happens when the right hand does not know what the left is doing.

As the trip went on, it became clear how important the female support team was for the success of the campaign and the well-being of the sailors. They looked after just about everything, functioning as look-outs, *escorts*, shoppers, public relations agents and nurses, while facing thousands of kilometres (6,700 km in 74 days) of dirt roads, often in very inhospitable areas and far from habitation.

For the campaigners, the coast of Bahia seemed to have no end, through 16 days of sailing and 10 days of being stuck in the fashionable tourist resort of Forty Seguro due to bad weather. But it was also a time to make friends in new places and to talk shop. Both Marnede and Francisco (Abillo) had earlier fished in the south on industrial fishing ships and so knew some of the areas that lay ahead of thorn.

Back in Fortaleza, we were busy co-ordinating between the support team on the road, the concerned families of the crew, the press and the participating NGOs. In May, we organized four workshops on the campus of the Federal University of Ceara on the themes of the campaign irresponsible fishing of lobster; real estate speculation; neglect of

artisanal fishing; and irresponsible tourism development.

The workshops attracted a good number of experts, students and others interested. Government representatives were invited to present their points of view, but were hard pressed for good answers. The workshops were the basis for concrete proposals that would be presented to all the interested parties and sent to the President of Brazil, Itamar Franco, with signed petitions—over 2,000 were collected.

The President did not respond to the request from the fishermen for a personal audience in Brasilia to present the petition. The Governor of the State of Ceara did not appear and never responded to the proposals. To a foreign journalist, he declared that the *jangadeiros* are long overdue for display in museums.

The support of the media in Fortaleza was impressive. We were invited to several morning news talk shows and given ample time to present the various aspects of the campaign. TV channels, radio and newspapers gave regular updates on the trip down the coast,

Home stretch

After crossing the State of Bahia, the campaigners were on the home stretch. Both the water and wind were getting colder, as they were approaching winter

in Rio. Another weather-imposed stop in Vitoria cost the crew five days of precious travel time.


From then on, there were several difficult spots, with treacherous currents and crosswinds. It took all the experience of Mestre Mamede to avoid a rocky island that seemed to be on collision course with the *jangada*. This was probably the scariest moment for the four intrepid travellers.

In Rio, the preparations for the team's arrival were in high gear and everything was planned for Saturday, 12 June, with a fleet of boats ready to escort the S.O.S. Sobrevivencia across the Bay of Guanabara. But the lord and master of the skies once more did not co-operate.

The result was heavy clouds and no wind to move the *jangada*. But on the morning of Wednesday, 16 June, Rio de Janeiro awoke in all its scenic splendour to see, despite no winds, the *jangada* working its way towards the Pracxa XV (Square 15) in the centre of the city, with 15 video cameras shooting its progress from the accompanying schooner.

TV personalities, and songwriter Doryval Cayimmi, were at hand to receive the four modest fishermen and their two fighting ladies, who had travelled 76 days in a memorable campaign, yearning for somebody, somewhere to listen to the call of the fishermen of Brazil. The expedition

ended on 19 June, after a three-and-a-half hour flight back to Fortaleza and a hero's reception in Prainha do Canto Verde that reunited all those—whether at sea, on the road or waiting anxiously back home—who had given a small part of their lives for a cause.

Despite the negative response of government officials, the fishermen of Ceara did not give up and, over the years, kept up the pressure by forging new alliances to unite the fishing communities. The resulting resurgence of the fishermen's movement has since yielded some surprising results that are bound to have a lasting and positive impact on artisanal fishing in Brazil. 

This report is by René Schärer, co-founder of the NGO, Instituto Terramar, member of the Fisheries Committee of the State of Ceara and father of the intrepid Michelle mentioned in the story