





AÇAI BERRIES IN THE AMAZON

BY SUSANNA KUMLIEN
PHOTO SUSANNA KUMLIEN



Surprisingly, the mouth of the Amazonian Basin specifically called Guajará Bay, situated on the estuary of the rivers Pará and Tocantins, looks strangely familiar from the air. The many islands, the vast areas of green separated by water, distinctly resemble the view of the landscape surrounding Stockholm.

But the similarities end as we lose altitude. The waters reflect shades of beige, brown and off-white, bringing sediments from the hinterland of the Amazon. And the flora, the buildings and the community are revealed to indeed be different as we go down for landing.

I am here to find out more about the açaí (pronounced aah-sigh-ee), the so-called Superberry that has been all the rage on the Californian health-market, brought there by a couple of surfers some eight years ago. Now, the rich and famous around the globe are said to crave for the blue berry, also called 'Rainforest Viagra' and claimed to cure just about anything from obesity to bad skin.

The açaí berry has also been said to be the most financially viable non-wood forest product from the Amazon delta. This local poor-man's staple diet, ironically being sold at 40 dollars for 250g in the US, is – according to organizations and companies found on the Internet – regarded as having the potential to completely transform the economic landscape of the Amazon Rainforest. No more logging, clear-cuts, mining and other industries causing damage to the environment of the Amazon as the blue berry conquers the world! Sounds wonderful. We can be healthy and at the same time save the world!

The açai palm (*Euterpe oleracea*) is a species of palm tree that grows in the floodplains of the Amazon. Its fruit (palm heart) and berries have been consumed by man since ancient times, and are still an important ingredient of the local diet. The name derives from the European adaption of the Tupian word *iwasa'i* – “fruit that cries or expels water”. Global demand for the fruit is expanding and the blue berry is now heading towards Sweden and the Nordic markets.

Each tree produces about 20 kg of berries and every day shiploads are transported on the river to Belém, the capital of the state of Pará and centre for the açai-trade. Workers slide up and down the palm-tree with a string around their feet with seeming ease.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, billion-dollar beverage giants such as Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Anheuser-Busch, now plan to add açai to their beverage lineups. The ‘açai-craze’ may provide a sustainable livelihood for the local inhabitants of the Amazon, allowing them to make money without cutting down the rainforest. Can the berry be part of central strategies in dealing with socio-economical constraints in the Amazonian floodplains?



By talking about the açai berry together with Dr Oz on one of her shows, Oprah Winfrey turned the then little known purple fruit from the Brazilian rainforest into a celebrity diet. Packed with antioxidants, minerals and vitamins as well as fatty oils, the açai has been launched as a miracle-berry, curing most afflictions and preventing diseases (it has even been said to reverse diabetes!). There is no scientific evidence to these claims, and due to the devious marketing strategies of companies claiming Oprah endorses their product, she has now filed a law-suit. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan is also filing suit on behalf of consumers being tricked.



School is provided here for the workers' children between ages 3 and 14. There are 76 pupils in total living with their families on the surrounding islands. The children are served a hot meal each day. The younger children attend class in the mornings, the older ones in the afternoon. There are no roads, the three teachers come and go with the boat on a daily basis, as do the children.



Alas, the economic importance of the açai is indisputable. Foremost it is being used by the locals. In a study of three traditional populations in the Amazon region, fruits from the açai palm were described as a major component of their diet (some 40 % of the total food intake). Hard figures are hard to get by, but there are estimates of the export-value of the açai being 40 million dollars back in '95.

A low-cost beverage where it grows, a luxury article in western juice-bars, health stores and to some extent the cosmetics-industry, will the blue berry help to save the world's huge green lounge, the Amazon Rainforest?

Because it is grown organically and marketed worldwide, the potential export-value of the açai is regarded as a huge asset to the region. Some of the companies involved in the açai-trade maintain that their activities enjoy support from organizations such as Greenpeace and WWF. However, in talking to representatives of these organizations, I have not been able to confirm these claims, other than Greenpeace mentioning açai as one of several possible means to save the Amazon (the report stating: "there is no *one* solution to save the Amazon Rain Forest"). Nor have I been able to find any evidence of proposed clear-cutting monocultures with açai.

Together with Jan-Eric Nyman and Urban Höglund, two Swedish guys determined to bring 'pure açai' – containing more açai than most products on the market – to Sweden, I visit their Brazilian subcontractor, 25-year-old Abilio Condero, since a year back the owner of Amazonfruit, which has is sited on the island

of Ilha Murucutu, close to Belém, capital of the Pará-region.

As the boat turns a corner of the smudgy river, we're travelling along trenchlike beaches seeing explosive growth of green. A little girl takes a swim outside the wooden pole houses where she lives. We are seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and the city skyline of Belém skyscrapers look as if they come from another planet

– I love this place. I was born and raised here and I will never leave, says Abilio. I find it hard not to believe him. The region is simply abundant with beauty, flowers – and fruit. There is the cucuaçu, the bacuri, the muruci, the buriti, and the camu camu.... to a Nordic Swede, it seems almost rude to not know the names of all the fruits, as we don't have as many species. But then again, in this region that is just not feasible, even for an expert.

Abilio, who has studied and lived in Michigan, bought the company from an 80-year-old harvester, who had been here for a long time. He provided a school for the workers' children, and Abilio is now building a new school. Meanwhile, the old one is still being used. There are no roads. People travel by boat here and children and workers arrive to the bridge.

The workers are said to be well-paid, but since I don't know their language, I have little means to check it out. Most of them live on the surrounding islands, and some on Ilha Murucutu itself. The school house and property is owned by the company, which rather reminds me of an old industrial village community in Sweden.



The city of Belém, capital of the Pará-region of Northern Brazil, is home to about 2 million people. Founded in 1616 to consolidate Portuguese supremacy over the French, the older parts of the city resemble the seventeenth century architecture of Lisbon. Colonial houses are now torn down to be substituted by concrete massive buildings of 23 stories or more and favelas (trenchtowns) surrounding the city are demolished for a motorway-construction.



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Raimundo Sergio de Menezas Santos is Amazonfruit's Commercial Manager. He is also Director at IBRAF – the Institute for Brazilian Fruit – for North Brazil. He finds the açai to be an ideal crop for the island.

He shows me around and stresses the importance of preventing monocultures.

– All trees here grow naturally. The açai is a natural species here, we don't have to plant them. I don't want plantations here, because the trees depend on natural variety for growth. The more the variety, the better the growth of the açai. As soon as we've cut one old tree down, the ones below thrive and grow rapidly, Raimundo says.

The natural competition for light makes the tropical rainforest a virtual incubator for plants. Standing in the midst of green, for a moment sensing the immense force of everything growing around me, I feel I can almost hear it. Workers have to cut back weeds on a daily basis around the buildings, using machetes to do so.

We are at 1.27 degrees Southern latitude, hence almost on the very equator. The sun shines straight from above and the air is soft and humid.

Here, the temperature is around 100 Fahrenheit or 37 Celsius for most of the year. There is no dry season, but a fairly regular afternoon rain. On the plane heading for Rio, a local told me that in Belém, the usual way to set a time for a meeting would be "before or after the rain".

And – most unfamiliar to a northern visitor – there are no seasons constituting natural constraints for growth. Thus, each tree has its own individual cycle of growth and rest.

Various trees attract multitudes of insects, which in turn attract a variety of birds. Next to logging and mining, clear-cutting and the establishment of vast monocultures constitute a threat to the delicate ecological equilibrium and the unparalleled biodiversity of the Amazon.

As right here, on this seemingly idyllic spot, it seems plausible that the açai may provide a sustainable livelihood for the local population, and a product for the rest of the world to drink, enjoy and spend their money on. Whether this berry can save the Amazon Rainforest, however, remains to be seen. As do its supposed miraculous medical effects. □

