

Two days in the field with Vanessa

Christiane Ehringhaus

In April 2006, Vanessa and I went on a 2-day field trip to the Projeto de Assentamento João Matos, in Sena Madureira, Acre, to test her questionnaire and assess how it integrated with her own questions.

After leaving Rio Branco in the early morning hours, we stopped in Sena Madureira, a sleepy little town. We chatted a few hours away, talking about research and the tricky questionnaire questions, while waiting for our hosts at the PA João Matos to finish their business.

The highway BR-374 from Rio Branco to Sena the landscape is almost one continuous pasture interrupted by the occasional (illegal) lumber yard. Finally, we left the highway and took a couple of “ramal” dirt roads until we reached PA João Matos and the neat, picket-fenced home of our host’s.

This area used to be extractive reserve until it was “invaded” by about 20 families, six years ago. A year later the area was declared a settlement project, a “projeto de assentamento.” During the five years since, many residents have deforested up to 80% of their land to establish cattle pastures, with the biggest clearings happening in 2005.

Vanessa and I were shocked that a piece of the extractive reserve had been sliced off and suffered deforestation so rapidly. It made us think about the important differences between the various types of land tenure models.

Our generous hosts were originally rubber tappers who lived in the city before retuning to the country side. They welcomed us warmly. We spent many hours talking with our hostess Dna Leide in the kitchen, our host Sr. Antonio, and his sons on the porch.





Lying in our hammocks, with a full moon and the quiet of the countryside outside the window, we talked late into the night. About work and our lives in Europe and Latin America. About the loves in our lives and our families. About being a researcher or an activist, the merits and demerits of economists, about life, colleagues, and friends in Acre. Good old gossip, and so much more.

Among the highlights for us was the 2-hour walk around the 50 hectare property, along a small ramal path, beside ponds and through the flooded forest, identifying plants, and trying out different fruit.

The walk took a toll on Vanessa's sandals, which were fixed first with a vine in the forest and later with a nail. You got to improvise, right? We joked about "inventing" a new non-timber forest product.

Finally it was time to say farewell to the hosts we'd come to care some much for. They were looking forward to Vanessa coming back and doing more research.

Between interview questions we'd chat and joke. Vanessa was a great sport in putting up with the jokes about the "Portuguese jokes," so popular in Brazil, and which Sr. Antonio had been saving for Vanessa's arrival. Vanessa and I aren't the best of joke tellers, we just laughed along.

The family took a shine to Vanessa and felt very comfortable in her easy and natural company. Vanessa herself felt at ease, helping them feel relaxed with us and our research. During this first trip the interview took incredibly long, which was cause for concern. At the same time, we learned an incredible lot about the region, the major livelihood issues, and the hopes and dreams of the family.





After such a peaceful time, and nothing more to worry about than some minor reservations about the questionnaire, we were in high spirits, happy to be on the highway to Rio Branco, heading home for a beer and a night out with friends.

Along the way, Vanessa took a picture of me standing and cheering in the middle of the road. Life was good.

We had no inkling of the dreadful danger waiting just a few miles and a few months ahead.



In Remembrance