



The unsung heroes of the Pantanal

Empowering local communities

A group of 14 young men of the indigenous Kadiwéu community in Brazil have become true fire fighting heroes as they protect their habitat by forming their own fire brigade. Their territory of 538,000 hectares in the south region of the Pantanal has been heavily affected by the fires. Cut off from civilization due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the group of 14 men took matters into their own hands when the fires got out of control.

After the rainy season ends, the official fire season starts, with the fire operators (PrevFogo/IBAMA) ready to act and to provide necessary gear and equipment in case of fires. This year however, the fires never stopped due to the absence of rain, but IBAMA had officially closed for the season. 'We knew it would take weeks before we could expect official authorities to step in', Rafaela Nicola, head of Wetlands International Brazil of the Corredor Azul program, explains.

So much for bureaucracy...

... a group of 14 Kadiwéu young men must have thought when they stood up to fight the fires themselves. They formed their own brigade called ABINK. When Rafaela and her co-workers learnt the ABINK men were risking their lives without any proper equipment or protective gear, Wetland International stepped in and bought the required gear.

To put the bravery of the ABINK in perspective, let's have a look at fire prevention and fighting in the northern region of the Pantanal. The main player here is the Wetlands partner organization SESC, managing a 108,000 hectares Ramsar site. SESC was chosen to be the host for the Pantanal 2 Operation, a fire fighting operation covering the whole northern territory of the Pantanal. It was supported in its efforts by the armed forces (the army as well as the navy), black hawks, boats, trucks and airplanes. Volunteers from surrounding villages - the church even arranged in cleaning the firemen's gear - also rised to the occasion. Even with this fully operational team, 80% of the Ramsar site went up in flames.





Fire outbreaks in the Pantanal in September and October.



Programme

Corredor Azul - Connecting People, Nature and Economies along the Paraná-Paraguay River System.

Goal

The Corredor Azul Program aims to safeguard the health and connectivity of the Paraná - Paraguay river system and its iconic wetlands – the Iberá Marshes and the Paraná Delta in Argentina, and the Pantanal in Brazil. Protecting and connecting people, nature and economies along the worlds largest remaining free flowing river-system.

Partner

Wetlands International

No proper alert

'The response came too late', Rafaela says, 'and we lack a proper alert and prevention system. Even with all this manpower, we are still going in blind. Our system alerts us (with a delay) that there is a fire but it provides no further information about intensity, direction of the wind or anything else helpful to decide on the best entry point. In addition, all the existing fire prevention programs are designed for forests, we need to tackle the fires in the wetlands, with their own dynamics and characteristics.

Collaboration with Resource Watch

At the moment Wetlands International is in the midst of developing a new fire alert system in collaboration with Resource Watch. The burnt areas of the SESC are now a pilot to map and research the effects of fire on wetlands. This will provide valuable input for a fire prevention plan specifically for wetlands.



Rafaela Nicola

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Rafaela Nicola, Head of Office for Wetlands International Brazil, coordinator of the Pantanal Component of the Corredor Azul Programme. She has worked at the Plate River Basin for more than 20 years, coordinating social and environmental initiatives with emphasis on wetlands conservation, local well-being, and environmental justice.

Technical and Scientific Director at Mupan – Women in Action for the Pantanal and Focal person for the ICCA Consortium in Brazil. Member of the Happiness Center of Bhutan (GNH Center).

Empowering communities

Rafaela continues: 'We have a 360 approach to address the fire issue in the Pantanal, involving stakeholders like the government, the farmers, NGOs, science institutes, etc. However, the unsung heroes here are these brave and courageous ABINK men that show us the great potential of an indigenous community, simply by empowering them with some tools to help them set up. They show their strength not just by standing up against the fires, but also by governing their own land, by coming to us with suggestions, and by showing their independency and self-sufficiency whilst preserving their culture.' In addition to combatting the fires, ABINK is looking at the future and how to rebuild and become more resilient after the fires. They want to set up a nursery of endemic seedlings to restore the burnt water borders as an extra protective measure and they proposed to start crop cultivation - not a regular part of the Kadiwéu culture, but in the given circumstances they think crops can help them to provide in their sustenance.

Life Plan

For an indigenous community it's quite exceptional to get organized in such a manner, to make use of "modern" resources, and to accept help from people outside the community.

'It took us several years of dedication to earn the trust of the Kadiwéu and it is very exciting to see our work is paying off'. Wetlands has been collaborating with the indigenous community to develop a 'Life Plan'. This plan maps out all aspects of the Kadiwéu culture and includes their view on sustainable land management, what waters need to be protected, where agriculture is possible, and where the sacred areas of the Kadiwéu are located.

The Life Plan and other projects we did together were contributing factors to the creation of ABINK. It lay the ground work for them and gave them the confidence to step up in an emergency situation, to take the reigns to lead the way forward.