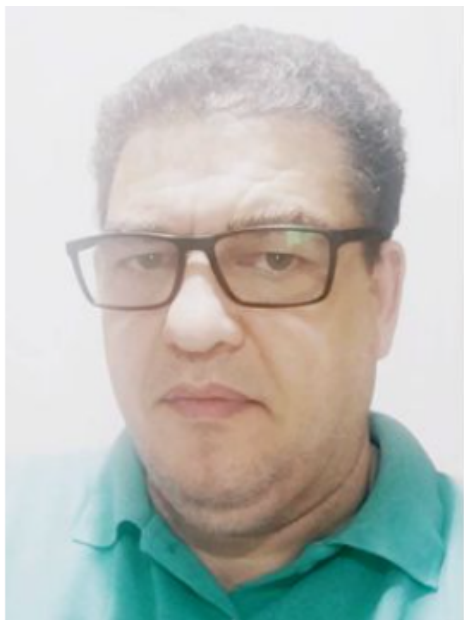


Behind the scenes of the Pantanal fires





Clovis from Instituto Gaia (L) and Claudia from Rede Pantaneira (R)

Local partners' vision and actions

The Pantanal is on fire. The effects are disastrous, for both people and nature. Yet, for most of us it may be hard to imagine how life goes on in Brazil, the country most effected by the Pantanal fires. What is reality like for people living there? Clovis from Instituto Gaia and Claudia from Rede Pantaneira (both working closely with Both Ends in the Pantanal, in the Wetlands without Borders program) explain how the fires are affecting their work and their communities.

The Pantaneira Traditional Community Network represents the indigenous communities in the Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul regions. Of the communities Claudia works with around 600 families have lost it all: their homes, their trees, their cattle - even their water is contaminated with ashes and unfit for consumption. The entire region has to deal with droughts where normally water is abundant. The communities no longer recognize their own territory. The characteristic different colors of the forests, the fields and the land, now all have the color of destruction, everything has turned to ashes. Claudia: 'If we look at the sky today we only see smoke, when we look down we see the dry ground. It's a chaos like none of us has ever experienced.'

No sun to be seen

Clovis's Instituto Gaia is settled in Cáceres, one of the municipalities with the highest rates of forest fires. He says, the communities living in the area are also affected in a political way: the government tries to shift responsibility for the fires to traditional communities and indigenous peoples. Their political capacities to resist large-scale projects such as the Paraguay-Parana waterway, are further diminished and their territories are even more under threat. Last but not least, the community's cultural origins, their sacred places, and their relationship with nature are destroyed by these fires.

"The characteristic different colors of the forests, the fields and the land, now all have the color of destruction, everything has turned to ashes."

Project

Wetlands without Borders

Goal

The Wetlands Without Borders program aims to achieve the long-term preservation of La Plata Basin. Characterized by a free river flow, sustainable economic development and conservation of biodiversity, with a key role for civil society in the governance for the restoration, conservation and sustainable development.

Both Ends works with local partner organizations Instituto Gaia and Rede Pantaneira.

Partner

Both Ends



Livestock and monocultures

Investigations show that the start of the fires can be traced to human activities. Claudia: 'Four big farms in Mato Grosso do Sul are responsible for the fires. They use them strategically to gain more territory in the Pantanal. The fire destroys the native forests and creates space to be taken over firstly by extensive livestock farming and subsequently by large scale monocultures, such as soy production. Traditional communities are often forced to leave their territories.' Claudia adds: 'The Pantanal is losing wetlands as a result of drainage activities where pastures are created, replacing native species by these monocultures. In addition, we see the impact of the construction of hydroelectric dams and the clearing of the forests that protect the springs.'



Prolonged drought

However, the advance and intensity of this year's fires is due to the prolonged drought – in 2020 it rained less and areas that normally flood yearly have dried up this year. The first rains were delayed, and are shorter, with less rain than average. Both Claudia and Clovis notice that the Pantanal loses a lot of water at the moment. For example, the Paraguay River is at its lowest level in recorded history at the moment.

Denial of the problem

To aggravate the situation, the federal Government has not invested in the necessary resources to fight the fires, or in environmental protection as a whole. Rather, they are doing the opposite: repealing laws that protect the environment and disregard agendas that deal with climate change and fires. Furthermore, the government omits preventive actions and has decreased the budget for inspection and deforestation from R\$102 million in 2019 to 76.8 million in 2020.

The impact on the work

The conservation of the Pantanal, the focus of Instituto Gaia, has been undermined for years by the planning and construction of dozens of small hydroelectric dams and deforestation. The loss of vegetation and animals due to the fires greatly increases the risk of permanently disturbing the very fragile balance of the entire ecosystem. For Rede Pantaneira, the impact of the fires on their work is big as well. Their main objective is to propose, implement and evaluate public policies for traditional peoples and communities. The work was already affected by Covid-19 and with the fires on top of this, the organization focusses on the urgent demands of the communities struggling for survival. Rede Pantaneira had to start providing humanitarian emergency assistance, such as food, water, saline and products for hygiene and protection against the virus. All of this requires a new way of organizing the work of the community network.

Wildfires tear through drought-racked Paraguay amid record heat

Recently, there have also been terrible fires raging in Both Ends' partner area in Paraguay. Just as the fires earlier this year in Argentina and last year in Bolivia, these are all interconnected. For further information, read this article in The Guardian.

The future of the Pantanal

Looking at the future and how to prevent the fires, Clovis and Claudia both have their ambitions. Clovis: 'We have worked for many years in the restoration of springs and in environmental education actions. Our work is focused on maintaining the wetland areas with conservation activities, campaigns around sensible water use, and production of water. With more water there will be once again more flooded areas and therefore less fires.' The focus of Rede Pantaneira is aimed at the formation of community fire brigades, as well as on the acquisition of fire prevention- and fire-fighting equipment. 'We have observed that if the communities have fire brigades and equipment, it can prevent the fire from getting so close to their homes', Claudia states. Rede Pantaneira will also work on proposals and implementation of public policies for the recovery and monitoring of traditional territories.

Existence with a little dignity

On the recovery of the burnt areas, Clovis acknowledges that they mainly rely on the strength of nature, but he emphasizes: 'We have plans to work with the traditional populations and indigenous peoples, where everything was burnt around their villages, on restoration by planting native seedlings.' Claudia concludes: 'We want to build partnerships with other organizations that have experience in environmental recovery, and work on setting up seed banks and native seedling nurseries. We believe that if we join forces, this sad and terrible situation in which our territories find themselves, can be minimized and with the hope that we can continue to exist with at least a little dignity in our own territories.'