



STORY

Joane: Plastic Is Killing Us in the Amazon

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RAINFOREST DEFENDERS | Joane (sub. inglés)



How much more plastic waste could the Amazon basin take before collapsing? How much more unconscious aggression? How much more environmental degradation?

A plastic bag, a polyethylene bottle, a piece of polyurethane... these are all ordinary, cheap, disposable objects. Their daily use is measured in billions of units throughout the planet.

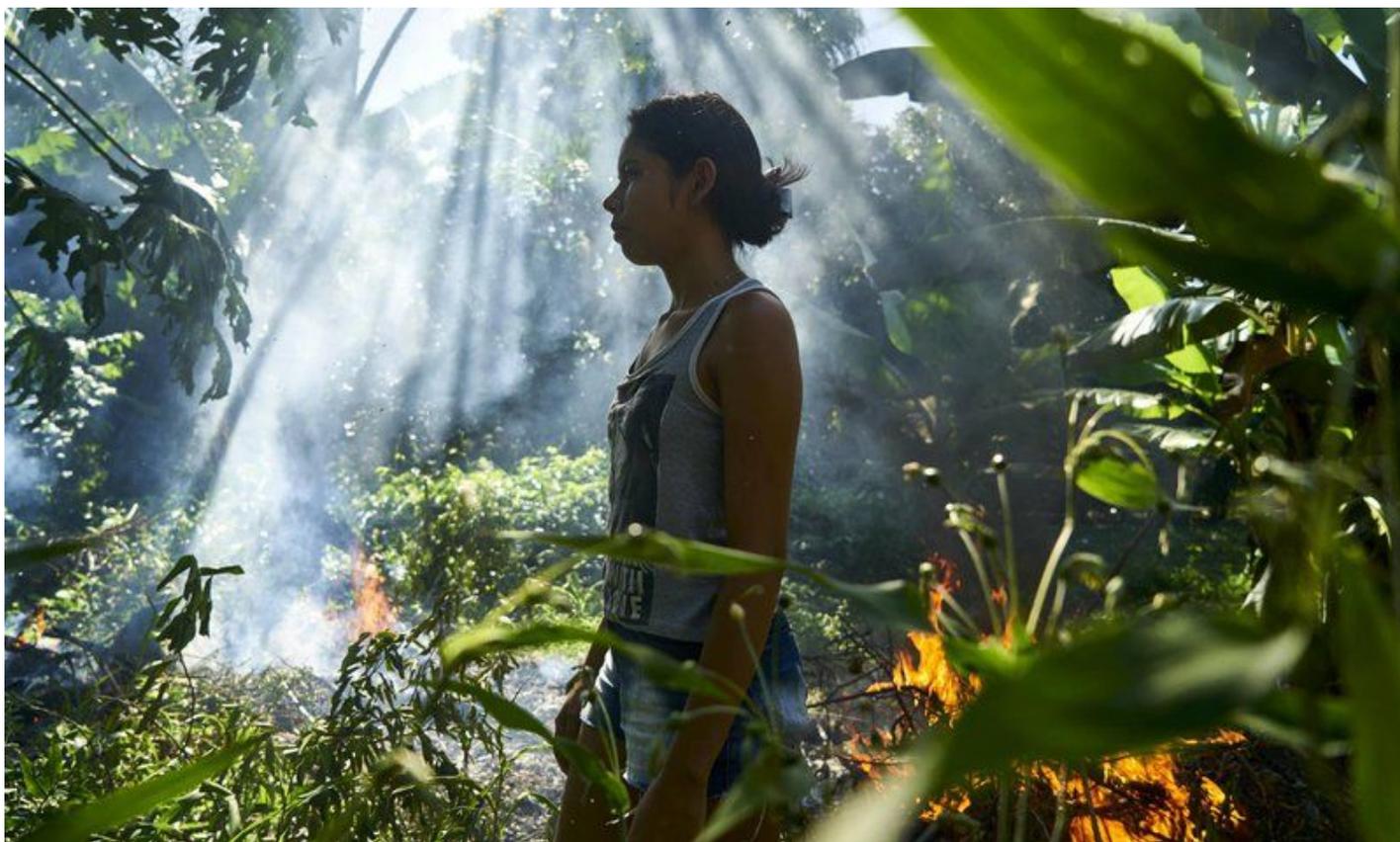
However, after one single use, they are systematically abandoned in nature, where they impact catastrophically, especially when they multiply up to infinity, invade the territory, decompose into micro-plastics and pollute water. They end up killing the river fauna: fish, turtles, birds.

According to Earth Day Network, Brazil (<https://www.earthday.org/2018/04/06/top-20-countries-ranked-by-mass-of-mismanaged-plastic-waste/>) sadly ranks first – over the United States - in bad management of plastic waste in the Americas.

In far too many areas of the Low Tapajós, the plastic buildup in the environment is huge. Stopping this absurd trend and starting to reverse it is also a huge – but not impossible – task.

An example of this is to be found in Suruacá, a small community within the Tapajós-Arapiuns Extractive Reservation

(<https://www.protectedplanet.net/reserva-extrativista-tapajos-arapiuns-extractive-reserve>), established by Decree S/N of November 6, 1998. There, something could begin to change if young people like 20-year-old Joane succeed in their efforts



Joane beside a bonfire used to burn plastic waste. Image by Pablo Albarenga. Brazil, 2019.

The Suruacá community was one of the first to become part of an extensive socio-environmental regeneration program led by the non-governmental organization Projeto Saúde e Alegria (<http://www.saudeealegria.org.br>), based in Santarem, in the state of Pará.

Joane's community illustrates how a coherent community policy, applied consistently over time, has far-reaching transformative effects.

The challenge is, undeniably, a tremendous one. But the Suruacá community is sufficiently organized for an initiative such as stopping the omnipresence of plastic waste to prosper.

Joane's mother, who is a teacher at the local school, says that when she was a little girl her daughter enjoyed playing with plastic things: "She made small jewels with them, complements for the bathroom, and small pots for plants". Now, making the most of the awareness derived from environmental education, Joane has decided to take action in her community.

The situation began deteriorating when the community's food model started to change and, in a matter of a few decades, went from a diet based on native crops, fruits, fish, and fresh water from the wells and the river sources (the beautiful igarapés), to an exogenous diet, which includes canned and packaged products, soft drinks and bottled water.

Who knows if this situation will be reversed sometime in the future. It won't be easy. But meanwhile, conscious young leaders like Joane generate ideas, lead projects, set goals.

Joane, together with members of the Young Tapajonic Collective, which she helped to found, carried out recently an awareness-raising action aimed at creating an impact.

An added problem to the waste generated by the community is the accumulation of plastic waste on the riverbanks coming from passing boats and from Alter do Chao, an emerging tourist resort right across the Tapajós. The wind and the currents drag the plastic waste to the shore, which every so often looks like a dumping site.

The action that Joane's group carried out consisted in drawing a gigantic Amazonian three-bridge boat on the shore with plastic waste and then taking an aerial picture of it. It was difficult to convince the community of the soundness of the idea, but when they saw the picture, they understood the reasoning behind it.

"The community coordinator thought that our action was going to harm the community because it would cast a negative light on it, for he believes that this is not Suruacá's problem, that it comes from outside". It took quite a lot of effort on the part of the young people to convince him, but in the end they succeeded - basically when he saw the picture and realized the impact it would have on the prefecture and other administrative bodies and make them aware of the need to take urgent measures.

Even though the real problem is the lack of solid waste management policies on the part of the prefecture - which is responsible for this matter.

Joane gives prominence to the change in habits that she says she perceives in young people in the community. This is what really makes her happy, particularly when she also gets the approval of her mother and her grandmother, who are themselves fighter carriers of ancestral values, learned from past life practices, much closer to survival in a natural environment, and who see continuity and future in their activist daughter and grand-daughter.

Besides the problem of waste, there is the threat of fire. People in the community make bonfires in which they burn plastics and rubber, generating toxic dark smoke - "not the way to deal with waste", as Joane says. Yet, every family in Suruacá has its own special corner for lighting campfires.



Joane with products from her village wrapped in plastic. Image by Pablo Albarenga. Brazil, 2019.

But then there are the big fires that some people light for the purpose of getting a plot of land for cultivation, which often result in forest fires. What is more, instead of reusing the plot - letting it rest for one year for the next harvest -, they burn another chunk of forest, and then another, and so they carry deforestation inexorably forward, often amplified by accidental fires. These practices have been going on for many decades and the cultural change needed to put an end to them and to the continuing depredation they entail will, no doubt, take time.

Despite her young age, Joane is determined to change things. She is thinking of putting into operation a new bio-digester. She is familiar with the design and knows its details well for she already built one elsewhere. This bio-digester, she explains, will generate gas for cooking and fertilizer for the vegetable gardens at the same time, as part of the very same cycle. "The next time I go to the city, I will buy the containers that are needed. If this works, surely the community will understand and end up adopting it". Her eyes shine with enthusiasm: it will surely be a great step forward.

As we go down a long wooden staircase in growing disuse that leads to the river shore to take some pictures, Joane tells us that she is convinced that more and more young people along the Tapajós River and beyond will end up joining in this type of initiatives. "There are people", says Joane, indignant, "who are possessed by a very strong desire to devour the jungle. Devour and devour. But the jungle is not infinite, and one day it will end".

But we can see a spark of hope in her eyes. Nothing would make her happier than seeing the jungle free of plastic waste, and the deadly fires extinguished.

These fires which not only consume the accumulated polymers and turn them into dark smoke in the patio of each neighbor of the Suruacá community, but devour the life of present and future generations.

To that Joane pits all the strength of her youth.

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