

Heart of the Mata

Campaign to save Brazil's Atlantic rainforest finds an unlikely ally: soya farmers

Paul Evans

Clicaea Ferreira's grandfather was a man of insight. If not for him, she says, the forest covering half her farm in the Campos Gerais region of Parana state, southern Brazil, would have been cut down. Ferreira, speaking to local farmers, gives a clear message: save the forest, go organic and, unusually for a speech about sustainability, grow soya.

It is Farmers' Day at the Ferreira farm, and as barbecue smoke and sounds of the local school band drift across the fields and woods, the scene owes more to European agricultural landscapes than the Atlantic rainforest — the Mata Atlantica — it has replaced. The rhetoric on the twin pillars of organics and biodiversity is couched in a familiar European language of environmental and social concern. But step from the recently harvested soya bean field into the forest and all that changes.

Under towering araucaria or "mokey-puzzle" trees, electric-blue Morpho butterflies strobe from the shadows, parrots and other dazzling birds yell from treetops, the skeleton of a capybara — the largest of all living rodents — lies across a path, and the ground has been raked by ant-eaters. Wolves, tapir and jaguar are seen in these 500 hectares (1,236 acres) of forest, and the farmers are very proud of its ecological value.

"Once, the Mata Atlantica was a forest that spread for 1,300,000 sq km," Ferreira says. "It contained 6.7% of all known species of plants on Earth. Now only 7.8% of the forest remains. Between 1920 and 1990, 100m araucaria trees were felled. In



Field and forest ... Clicaea Ferreira on her soya farm Photo: Rafael Dabul/Alpro

2002 a law was passed protecting the trees, but there is still illegal felling going on. We must stop the felling because it's killing our future."

Along with NGOs, local authorities and government help, the farmers are restoring the forest. The plan for Campos Gerais is to link the fragments with wildlife corridors, plant native araucaria instead of exotic conifers and eucalyptus, and create a buffer zone around the restored forest of organic, non-GM crops.

Philipp Stumpe of the conserva-

tion organisation Preservacao says Parana holds most of the remaining Atlantic forest in Brazil. "Our target is to acquire 10,000 hectares in 10 years to add to existing protected fragments. We have set up a tree nursery and will plant 400 hectares of trees in wildlife corridors this year, and we are establishing a seed bank of forest flora."

After a freak frost in 1975 devastated coffee plantations, soya became Parana's major cash crop, and was so lucrative — supplying feed to the

processed meat trade — that it spread to the Amazon, overtaking logging and ranching as the engine of deforestation. Following an international campaign there is now a moratorium on the expansion of soya in the Amazon, but that does not affect GM soya production in other sensitive ecosystems in Brazil.

Ferreira sells her organic, non-GM beans to Alpro, best known in Europe for soya milk. Her farm is part of a sustainable development initiative under the auspices of the Socio-Environmental Institute of Agricultural Research and Sustainable Development (Isapades), supported by the agri-environment scheme Floresta.

The beans go to Agrorganica, a fair trade company that tests for GM contamination and ships them to Alpro in Europe. While the main players in soya receive international opprobrium for their environmental record, Alpro's market is growing because of its right-on credentials.

John Allaway, marketing director of Alpro's UK division based in Kettering, Northamptonshire says: "Plant-based foods offer more solutions to social and environmental problems. Animal-based foods use 10 times more land, 100 times more water and 11 times more fuel.

"We can trace the origins of all our ingredients to ensure they are GM-free. Only 30% of our soya is organic at present but all the 60 growers we buy from in Brazil are now organic."

Ben Ayliffe, forest campaigner for Greenpeace, is impressed by Alpro's involvement in Brazil. "They are streets ahead of the rest of the trade ... It's not greenwash; they practise what they preach."