

Europe for its purportedly high levels of antioxidants. Now she could take advantage of the fad.

In January 2009 Dona Rosario stumbled across a surveying party on her farm. Planting stakes and tying ribbons around trees, they were slicing up her holding into smaller parcels. "They were saying, 'What a great açaí place—let's divide it up and sell it,'" she told me. The buyers would then use the courts to boot out the helpless occupants—a common practice in Amazonia, as Dona Rosario knew all too well.

"I had a fit," she said. "I said, 'I own this land, I planted this land.'" The surveyors ignored her. After she bought the land she had been told the title was invalid—the previous owners had walked away from their taxes. She had spent a decade paying the back taxes and acquiring the title even as she restored the land. She had grown up seeing her parents lose one piece of land after the next. Here the same thing was happening to her.

One difference between Dona Rosario and her parents was that she had a phone. Another was that she had some capital—a freezerful of açaí and a bank account with a little in it. With the phone she called government inspectors and showed her documents to them, all the while threatening to use her money to hire a lawyer. "They looked it up and said, 'Wait a minute, you can't steal this land.'" The surveyors backed down.



Vendors in the main market of Belém, the port at the mouth of the Amazon, sell tree seeds for the region's farmers, many of whom replant the forest with useful tree species like açaí (celebrated for its fruit juice), bacuri (a fruit somewhat like a sweet-and-sour papaya), and bacaba (another popular fruit).

Similar stories are being repeated throughout Amazonia. Six months after Dona Rosario saw the surveyors on her land, Brazilian president Ignacio Lula da Silva signed Provisional Law 458, a remarkably ambitious attempt to straighten out land tenure in Amazonia—a root cause of the violence and ecological destruction of the past forty years. It gave title to maroon communities whose members already occupied the land and had less than two hundred acres apiece, effectively bringing a struggle that has lasted for centuries to a victorious close. Pulling these thousands of settlements out of the shadows, Pereira said, will allow the state to invest in schools and clinics, something it can't legally do while their existence is contested.

Provisional Law 458 was immediately challenged in court on behalf of industrial and environmental groups, both of whom argued that it would reward squatters for taking land illegally. Their alarm was easy to understand. The law would give control of a substantial part of the Amazon to its residents, and nobody was sure what they would do.

I happened to visit Dona Rosario not long after Lula's signature. In her isolated area, she had heard little about the new law. As Hecht told her about it, she nodded in forceful agreement. Her ancestors had come from Africa and blended with American natives and created something new. In their mixed way they had taken care of the forest; it was no accident, she believed, that all of the most valuable and beautiful areas of the Amazon were full of *quilombos*.

"Forest" was perhaps the wrong word. Outsiders saw the region as a forest—impenetrable, dark, full of threats. People like Dona Rosario saw it another way, as a place that their ancestors had tended and shaped, mixing old traditions with something of their own. They had been forced to live covert, hidden lives, always worried about dispossession. Now they would be free to live in their creation, the world's richest garden.