

A lush green forest scene with sunlight filtering through the dense canopy of trees. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Fighting for the Forest

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The Amazon rain forest is one of the most wonderful places on Earth - the biggest, oldest, and richest forest in the world. It covers an area that is almost as big as Australia. It is home to millions of different kinds of animals, plants, and birds. Most of the world's fresh water is here, and the forest plants clean the Earth's air every day. It is very hot, wet, and dark. For man's future, the rain forest is probably the most important area in the world.

Chico Mendez was born near the Amazon town of Xapuri, Brazil, in 1944. There were no schools in the rain forest, and Chico started working at the age of nine. Like the rest of his family, the young boy earned money by taking small amounts of rubber from the forest's trees. The rubber was then sold to local factories. This is an old style of farming. The trees are not hurt when you take rubber from them. In this way, the forest and its people lived together comfortably.

As a young boy, Chico did not think about the world outside of his town, his family, and his work. But as he grew, he learned more and more about the rain forest. He learned how to use forest plants as medicines and for food. Like forest people for thousands of years before him, he understood that man must use the rain forest carefully and thoughtfully.

But people are often too selfish to think about the future. While Chico grew up, large areas of the rain forest were destroyed by greedy businesses. Near Xapuri, thousands of trees were burned to make new fields for modern farms. But without the forest, the land soon became dry and poor.

Food and grass for the animals stopped growing in the new fields after only a few years. So the farmers cleared more trees for fields, and the problem became more serious.

In other parts of the Amazon, the forest was burned to build roads and electricity stations. Many businesses cut down thousands of trees and sold the wood cheaply for furniture and paper. The rain forest is more than 180 million years old.

When it is cut down, it will not simply grow back. It is gone forever.

Chico felt very angry toward the businessmen and farmers near Xapuri. The rain forest was important and he wanted to save it. But Chico was just a poor rubber farmer. When he spoke to the businessmen, they did not listen. Money was too important to them. So Chico spoke to local politicians. But they were only interested in power. Chico was not important.

He wanted people to listen, so he had to think of another way.

Chico started talking to ordinary people about the rain forest. He discovered that hundreds of people agreed with his ideas. His hope grew. "Many voices are more powerful than one," he thought. But the rich businessmen still did not listen. These powerful people, and greedy politicians, did everything possible to stop Chico's fight. Chico made many enemies in Xapuri at this time, and his life became more dangerous. But, like great men before him, Chico wanted to fight peacefully-with

words, not with guns or knives. He knew that he had to change people's ideas.

Chico spoke to more and more people in the Xapuri area. He asked them about their work, and about the farms and businesses in their towns. Soon Chico knew about business and farming plans before they happened. So when big farmers or businessmen wanted to clear a new area of forest, Chico organized group meetings on that land. Soon hundreds of people came together in this way and stopped the work of the forest clearers. Large areas of the forest were saved.

But Chico's work meant that poor people-factory workers, truck drivers, and farm workers-were losing their jobs. Chico knew that he needed to find new jobs for these people. They needed jobs that did not destroy the rain forest. Then he had an idea that worked: People must stop cutting or burning the forest, but they could take forest fruit, plants for medicines, and rubber. People will look after the forest if they earn money from it. And they need a healthy forest to earn money now and for the future.

In the 1980s these were dangerous ideas. Business was very important to the Brazilian government. Brazil was not a rich country, but it wanted to help its people. Big companies brought in new money for better roads, houses, schools, and hospitals. So the government gave money to new farms. It paid people to burn the forest and to start new businesses. Most people agreed that this was good for Brazil. Chico was the first Brazilian man to speak out against new businesses. His ideas were very new and very strange.

It was almost impossible to change people's ideas. But, in Xapuri, parts of the forest were saved. This gave Chico hope. He knew that more people needed to understand his message. He also understood that money was very important. So he traveled around the country and explained the problem in a new way. When the forest is destroyed, two things happen: First, there is new land for new business or farming. This makes money quickly for Brazil and it is a good thing. But second, thousands of animals, plants, and trees are destroyed. Over time, these will give Brazil more money than factories or farms. Not everyone believed Chico's words. But scientists agreed that they were true. At last, people could begin to see a better future for the forest and for Brazil.

In 1985 Chico started a national group of forest workers. People across Brazil now knew about Chico's ideas, and most big Brazilian businesses knew about Chico's success in Xapuri. They started to worry. As Chico became more popular, he also made more and more dangerous enemies. Powerful politicians and businessmen were very angry about his work. Businessmen gave politicians large amounts of money and asked for help, and the politicians used their power against Chico. They made his life and work as difficult as possible. They even sent him to prison. But Chico did not stop fighting for the forest. He knew that his life was in danger. Many people wanted to see Chico dead. But Chico did not listen; he had other plans.

International companies owned many of the biggest farms and factories in the Amazon rain forest. Maybe personal conversations with the companies' presidents were the best way to save the rain forest for the world's future.

It was difficult work for one man. But Chico knew that he was the best man for the job.

Later in 1985 Chico traveled to the United States and talked to many international companies. Some of the companies listened, and people around the US soon became very interested in this brave man from Brazil. The 1980s were big years for business and money in all of the world's richer countries. International business got stronger and many rich people became richer. But by 1985 there were people who wanted to believe in something more important. They wanted a safe and comfortable world for their children. Chico Mendez's intelligent message was not only about money; it was about the world's future. It was the message that people needed to hear.

In the next few years Chico's name became famous across the US and around the world. Newspaper reporters interviewed him, television producers made programs about him, and famous people wanted to meet him. More and more people sent money to protect areas of the forest. But across most of the Amazon area, big farmers and businessmen were still clearing the rain forests to make quick, easy money.

At last, some Brazilian politicians understood that Chico's ideas were important, too. The government started making plans to protect large areas of the Amazon rain forest.

In November 1988 Chico's ideas became part of Brazilian law. In some areas, people had to stop clearing the forest. But they could collect fruit, medicinal plants, and rubber in these areas. Chico worked hard to make more and more of these special areas. But as his dreams started coming true, someone stopped him in the only possible way.

Chico Mendez, the famous forest fighter, was murdered outside his home on December 22, 1988. Many people believed that they knew the killer - an important man in Brazilian government and business. But that was difficult to prove.

Chico's life was cut short, but his brave new ideas continued in other people. After his death, people around the world sent money to help Chico's work. More of the rain forest was protected and big business lost some of its power. But people did not stop clearing the forest completely.

Today, man is still destroying thousands of square kilometers of the Amazon rain forest every year; hundreds of different animals and plants are lost every day. More than 20% of the forest is already lost forever. It took millions of years to grow, but at this speed it will disappear completely in only fifty years.

We must not forget the work of Chico and people like him. One man changed the world's ideas. We have to think carefully about the things that we buy today. Our actions can save the rain forest. Chico's brave fight must continue.

- THE END -

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