

AAINews

APPROPRIATE AGRICULTURE INTERNATIONAL
CO., LTD

1-2-3-403 Haramachida, Machida, Tokyo, 194-0013 JAPAN.
TEL/FAX:+81-42-725-6250 Email: aai@koushu.co.jp

On the banks of the Amazon

Though I have been involved in a number of development studies in different countries, it was my first time to take off from Narita Airport towards the east. The current study was conducted for the development of livestock farming in the northern part of Tocantins State, which is located between the southern edge of the Amazon region and the semi-arid area called Cerrado. The main agricultural activity of the area is livestock farming and a handful of rich farmers, who each own several thousand hectares of land, are engaged mainly in beef production. At the same time, a large number of poor farmers practice slash-and-burn farming to produce food for their own consumption. The cleared land is subsequently turned into pasture land. This style of agricultural activity has been a major environmental problem, therefore, the main task of our mission this time was to find a way on the effective utilization of the already cleared and cultivated grassland, while protecting the remaining forests.

Bearing that task in mind, I went around the grasslands within the targeted area, and quite often noticed the natural vegetation of mainly palm species such as babassu palm and buriti palm. The babassu palm in particular is listed in the "Promising tropical plant species of the 21st century", as its potential economic value is thought to be quite high. Its seed is rich in oil, while its fruit shell can also be utilized as fuel. The trunk provides construction materials, the leaves can be made into floor mats, hats, baskets and so on. Presently its value as a source of oil is apparently going down, but in the future more demand can be expected for the edible core, the palmetto. Likewise the palms will be valued as a source of activated charcoal. At the same time, from a botanical point of view it is classified as a precious species, which requires protection. However, in certain slash-and-burned grassland areas babassu palm, whose growth is far more vigorous than other species in the same area, dominates the local vegetation to the extent that it makes the area look like a palm seedling nursery. In other words, for proper conservation of this species, appropriate management such as thinning is necessary. If such unique plant resources specially grown in the area can be well utilized on an industrial scale, it may very well contribute to increasing cash income and improving the livelihoods of poor farmers. This would also lead to conservation of this precious palm species, attaining the task of balancing agricultural development and environmental conservation. The catch-phrase "the future of Tocantins lies beyond the babassu palm", does not really sound like an exaggeration any more.

However, in order to utilize babassu palm effectively to bring some income gain to the local community, a number of problems related to harvesting, taking out seed and processing need to be overcome first. A group led by a researcher of Japanese-descent at the food technology department of a university in Tocantins State has been studying methods of babassu palm utilization, including oil extraction from seeds. They are trying their best despite a limited budget, and I strongly felt that any small support for their efforts would be a great encouragement for them.

My first visit to a Latino country thus ended. With the sun sinking in the Amazon and the rhythm of samba in the air, and a glass of "pinga", the locally produced sugarcane rum in my hand, a thought came to my mind: "When I come to Brazil next time, I would like to start a rural community development project using babassu palm resources."

(By Ohnuma, on the banks of the Amazon, May 2001).



Young babassu palm trees growing in pasture



Vigorously growing babassu palm