

CASE STUDY

SAMBAZON: Providing sustainable forest management to Açaí fruit growers in the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest

BUSINESS
CALL TO
ACTION



Initiative Description

In November 2011, the US-based food company SAMBAZON (*Sustainable Management of the Brazilian Amazon*) joined the Business Call to Action with a commitment to train indigenous communities in the Amazon Estuary region on sustainable harvesting of the Açaí berry, a small, round, purple berry similar in appearance to a blueberry. Açaí, which grows on palm trees along the banks of the Brazilian Amazon River, has been a staple of the Amazonian diet for centuries, and is most commonly consumed as a porridge or for use in beverages. In the last 20 years, Açaí has become an international 'superfruit', and is now experiencing unparalleled demand in both domestic and international markets. This has created a significant economic opportunity for impoverished small-scale farmers to harvest the fruit from the wild.

SAMBAZON's Business Call to Action goals include:

- partnering with 7,000 growers in organic and fair trade certification by 2016;
- increasing the quantity of certified production areas and preserving 2 million hectares of Amazon Rainforest biodiversity by 2016; and
- increasing the availability of certified organic and fair trade fruit in the Amazon estuary by 10 percent every year from 2010 to 2016.



Business Model

Recognizing wild-harvested Açaí's potential as a vehicle to promote sustainable development, SAMBAZON's founders created a socially responsible business in 2000 with a mission to be the world's premier organic lifestyle brand. Building upon the equity of Açaí, Brazil and the Amazon, SAMBAZON is promoting health, prosperity and positive socio-economic change from the rainforest to the consumer.

Guided by the principle of the 'triple bottom line' (social, environmental and economic success), SAMBAZON pioneered a market-driven conservation business model based upon supplying certified Açaí to the worldwide marketplace. The company only sources Açaí from small-scale

SAMBAZON was founded to promote positive social and economic change. We didn't want to just start a company or market a new product. We wanted to build a vertically integrated business model that directly impacts the health and sustainability of indigenous communities, and protects the biodiversity of the Amazon Rainforest.

Ryan Black
CEO and Co-Founder, Sambazon

suppliers who participate in an organic and fair trade certification, and sustainable agroforestry management programmes.

How it Works

Provision of training courses

By training the communities in the Marajo Archipelagos (the region within the Amazon estuary where the SAMBAZON manufacturing plant is located) on good harvesting practices and organic crop production, SAMBAZON helps local Açaí growers to improve their grove yields and fruit quality, and in turn promotes economic freedom and prosperity. Since this training includes water preservation and environmental conservation, the initiative helps to reduce degradation of forests and ensures the long-term sustainability of productive land. The training includes:

- forest management and organic crop production for better productivity and yields;
- water preservation and domestic waste management;
- fair trade practices, health and safety; and
- alternative livelihood and income-generation possibilities.

Each course consists of a one-hour lecture and three hours in the field. Courses are provided year round and are updated on an annual basis to meet the demands of local communities. To obtain organic and fair trade certification, each grower is informed of prohibited materials such as pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, ant and termite killers, and livestock vaccines. In addition, growers learn about items that must be discarded because they can contaminate the soil, such as chemicals and waste materials (e.g. old batteries, used oil from motors).



In order to implement the training program and facilitate the courses, SAMBAZON collaborates with government institutions such as the State of Amapá’s Institute of Scientific and Technological Research (IEPA), the Industrial Social Service (SESI) and the Forest National Institute (INF). When dealing with Amazonian native communities and biodiversity, it is very important to have the support of government entities in order to prevent misconduct.

Seasonal scheduling of courses

SAMBAZON’s training team is composed of SAMBAZON staff members from the supply chain department; government institutions and NGO partners validate these efforts. The team’s itinerary for travel to Açaí-growing communities for training is often set according to each area’s harvest period.

Usually, courses are provided during the region’s off season so that the forest management training can be performed in the grove. All participants are registered in SAMBAZON’s grower database, which contains socio-economic information along with a map of the harvest area. This information is used for fair trade and organic certification, and for monitoring the communities’ social, environmental and economic progress.

Certification

Once growers complete the training, their information from the SAMBAZON

logbook is entered into the control list used by Ecocert, a third party certifier, for organic and fair trade certification (Ecocert Brazil certifies that growers are organic and facilitates fair trade certification through Ecocert France).

Organic certification ensures that Açaí is naturally harvested and uses no pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers or any other prohibited products. Fair trade certification is a commitment by SAMBAZON to never buy fruit below an established minimum price. This price is calculated by the fair trade certifier, who considers the fruit’s cost of production, availability and living costs in the areas where it is harvested. Each year, auditors from Ecocert visit the growing communities to interview the certified growers.

Monitoring

Although they are referred to as growers, the families that harvest Açaí are really pickers since the Açaí fruit grows wild. In order to ensure their compliance with organic standards and methods, monitoring of grower communities is an integral part of the initiative. SAMBAZON monitors growers by visiting their communities year round in partnerships with Ecocert. If a problem is detected in a particular area, the inspection in that area is intensified. In addition to regular inspections for certification, Açaí growing areas are monitored at least every three months by SAMBAZON’s supply chain department.

Results Achieved

To date, SAMBAZON has trained over 1,200 families (around 8,400 people) on sustainable agro-forestry techniques for Açaí palms and berries. In the process, SAMBAZON has ensured that a sustainable supply meets the growing demand for Açaí berries and increased the incomes of growers in the Amazon estuary.

Business Impact

SAMBAZON’s Açaí-based products are 100 percent certified organic and fair trade. SAMBAZON benefits from having a large number of certified suppliers and opportunities to source fruit from a variety of different locations. It can obtain high-quality Açaí while ensuring social and environmental sustainability. By establishing trade relationships directly with communities, SAMBAZON eliminates the middlemen that are the main causes of price hiking and decreased quality of Açaí fruit.

While SAMBAZON earns the majority of its revenue in the United States, Japan and Korea, other markets such as Australia, Canada, and Brazil represent growing markets. Business outside the United States is forecasted to represent 30 percent of SAMBAZON’s business by 2016.

Development Impact

SAMBAZON designed this initiative both for communities already working with Açaí and those that will soon be harvesting the fruit. Growers are trained in forest management for better Açaí productivity, organic crop production and good harvesting practices. By applying these techniques, growers from the over 2,500 participating families can extend the harvest period for Açaí and improve grove yields from 2.5 tons per hectare to 4 tons per hectare each year. This could represent a 40 percent increase in earnings from existing lands.

In addition, grower families’ buying power has more than tripled in the past ten years. Many women who have begun harvesting Açaí no longer need to depend on their husbands’ income. The harvest season has also increased from 4 months to 7 months because of the management practices SAMBAZON has helped to institute. In addition, growers are trained in alternative sources of income generation such as harvesting the hearts of the Açaí palm to sustain their livelihoods during the off-season.

As part of the company’s commitment to Fair Trade, SAMBAZON invests 5 percent of the amount received from purchased fruit into communities for hospitals, schools and community centres. During its five-year partnership with Business Call to Action, this investment has totalled over \$2 million.



Innovations

that improve lives

Key Success Factors

Mutual trust

In order to establish a viable and trusting relationship with Açaí growers, SAMBAZON does not require growers to sell their harvests exclusively to the company. Instead, growers can sell to whatever buyer they prefer. SAMBAZON provides growers with forest management courses and assists with procuring equipment for harvesting Açaí. As a result, growers appreciate SAMBAZON's support and often give the company preference in the sale of their fruit.



Involvement of partners

SAMBAZON works with a number of partners in implementing this initiative, including a range of government agencies. Partnerships are critical to ensure that the programme is sustainable and has credibility with grower families.

Next Steps and Spin Off Effects

The company plans to broaden this successful initiative by expanding to three additional states in the Amazon – Acre, Rondonia and the state of Amazonas – and increasing the number of trained growers. This opens the door for thousands of families in the western Brazilian Amazon to benefit from the initiative.

In addition, monitoring will be improved in order to better track outcomes. As the productive areas grow in size, the number of certified grower families will increase as well. As more families participate, more fruit becomes available and more rainforest biodiversity is conserved.



Recently, SAMBAZON has started sanitation and garbage-collection programmes in grower communities to protect the Açaí crop and the environment. With nearly all of the communities located in remote areas, their trash must be collected

and transported to the nearest city. SAMBAZON provides communities with drums and liners to store their trash for collection.

In addition, SAMBAZON donates water filters to improve the quality of grower communities' water, reducing the risk of disease and contamination.

Future plans includes the construction of aseptic latrines to prevent water and soil contamination.



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