

An Interview with Malcolm Forest

By **Ilan Wurman**, Claremont McKenna College '10 and **LR Staff**

Malcolm Forest might be considered a renaissance man, firmly planted in the 21st century. Born in Brazil, he is an accomplished singer/musician, composer, producer, and celebrity host as well as a respected environmentalist and cultural historian. He studied first in his native Brazil, and then at the University of California Los Angeles, spending several years living in the United States before returning to his homeland. In today's age of environmental uncertainty, Malcolm Forest has used the breadth and depth of his knowledge and experiences to found and lead a reforestation project, the Brazilian Forests Project, within his non-governmental organization AMAR, and the City of São Paulo Green Belt Biosphere Reserve Neighbors and Friends Association.

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Question Leadership Review: You are a man of many interests and talents. How and when did you become particularly interested in preserving the environment?

Answer, Malcolm Forest: In the late sixties, the city of São Paulo, today one of the most densely populated cities in the world, underwent a vigorous economic boom that brought about an almost immediate smog problem. Something like what is happening in some of the major industrial centers in mainland China today.

When I was studying in the States, at UCLA, in the early seventies, smog was already a major problem in Los Angeles. In fact, it had started to be a visible environmental problem much earlier than that, even before World War II. Traveling to and from São Paulo to L.A., back in those days, I noticed the huge environmental problem we were faced with in both cities. I then began to have an interest, first in recycling and then in forest conservation.

Question: What do you see as some of the major environmental challenges Brazil faces today?

Answer: The challenges are somewhat the same in most countries. It involves awareness of the problem, and leadership toward rigorous and immediate action. Education and legislation enforcement are key to the solution. Brazil still has a low level of awareness regarding the environmental issue. Although environment-specific protection laws are quite good and comprehensive, there are loop holes in other laws and even tax incentives for land clearance for agricultural projects. The big problems are lack of enforcement and poor education. Brazil lacks a sound ecological and sustainable development curriculum from basic education upwards.

Of course, the other side of the coin is the need for a paradigm change. Societies need to promote a cultural shift from a defensive attitude towards the environment to a proactive approach for environmental restoration.

Question: Can you tell us a little about the "internationalization" of the Amazon Region?

Answer: From a geopolitical standpoint, it appears that Brazil will face a serious problem in the coming years. Devastation in the Amazon Basin continues, despite all media commotion. Brazilian governments have failed in the preservation of the major, and last, great rain forest in the world. Poverty plagues the region. It is lawless, to a great extent. The Brazilian Armed Forces have suffered severe budget cuts in the last two decades. As a consequence, surveillance and enforcement are not what they should be in the region and around national borders. The area is huge and inhospitable and this imposes another hardship. The new Brazilian Constitution of 1986 has given autonomy to the Brazilian Indian Reservations. Local State Government has no legal jurisdiction over them, and neither does the Federal Government. President Lula has created many additional Indian Reservations in the Amazon Region in his first term in office. On the one hand, this should help preserve nature and local native cultures and populations. But on the other, the consequence could be a "major independent state" being formed in the region. Foreign NGOs and missionaries are basically the only ones there. And, of course, the Amazon is incredibly rich in its biodiversity and natural resources. Both neighboring countries and major world powers have vested interests in the Amazon. It is the most important natural fresh water reserve on the globe. All this could add up to geopolitical instability in the region.

Question: When did you found your non-governmental organization, AMAR, and what can you tell us about its mission?

Answer: AMAR was founded almost ten years ago. It started informally with a small group interested in the preservation of the Cantareira Forest in the greater São Paulo area. This group had as leaders Vera Lucia Braga and Mauro Victor. A popular movement began. It evolved into a petition to the local and UNESCO authorities with over 150,000 signatures, requesting that the São Paulo Green Belt become a Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO and that the building of a major and devastating perimeter highway cutting through the Cantareira Forest, the largest urban forest in the world, be stopped. This movement was successful. AMAR became a formal NGO, a member of UNESCO's Planet Society. Its mission today is much broader and includes preserving Biosphere Reserves in general, communities in and around them, promoting paradigm changes, education and reforestation through the *Brazilian Forests Project*. Other past actions included the transformation of a decadent and overcrowded state prison in São Paulo called Caradiru into a green area with a rain forest park; many building codes and zoning law changes to protect green areas in São Paulo, and local educational and historic heritage preservation activities, to name a few.

Question: What kind of leadership will be required to protect Brazil's environmental heritage? Particularly, how can a new paradigm for Brazilian Forests be realized?

Answer: Leadership is key, especially servant and transformational leadership. It should act on the root causes: education and enforcement. Also, leadership is urgently needed in promoting paradigm changes. The world faces major problems. The immediate remedy will come through leadership in reforestation, and restoration of a "natural habitat" for mankind, now. The ***Brazilian Forests Project*** aims at promoting all this: global cooling, generating jobs, life quality, and wealth.

Question: What does the world need to know about the environmental progress in Brazil?

Answer: There are good laws. Some can be copied by foreign states. The São Paulo Green Belt Biosphere Reserve poses an interesting model for major metropolitan areas. In fact it has been studied by New York City environmental authorities for local application in the New York metropolitan area.

There are always lessons to be learned every time there is a problem. I should say that it is high time people, governments, corporations, and NGOs of the world get together and work under servant leaders for remedy and transformation. This is the only way to ensure the survival of the planet and improvement in the quality of life. AMAR is open for contributions, members and collaborations. Visit our website: www.amarsp.org.br .