

## Chico Mendes

The Amazon Rainforest means so much to so many people. It is the lungs of the planet because it helps produce the oxygen that we breathe. It is home to many discovered and undiscovered species. However, there are also people living and working in the Amazon. Finally, the forest provides resources which can be sold around the world. This helps to support the economy of Amazon countries. All of this means that sometimes people disagree about how to treat the rainforest. Chico Mendes was one of those fighting for the forest and for the people who live there.

Chico was born on December 15th 1944 deep in the Amazon Rainforest. By the age of nine he was working with his father as a rubber tapper. He extracted the latex from the rubber trees and this was turned into rubber. The tappers worked long hours for low pay. They weren't educated. This was to make sure that they were illiterate and innumerate. This stopped them demanding better conditions. Rubber tappers often became ill too. The rainforest was full of hazards and the fumes from making rubber were harmful. The healthcare was not good and lung disease was common.

Chico learnt to read as an adult. He began to speak up for the rights of the rubber tappers. He wrote letters to politicians. However, he was ignored. To make matters worse, the rubber tappers' jobs were in danger. Rubber could now be made in other ways so the tappers were no longer needed. The land was being sold to cattle ranchers who wanted to clear the forest. The tappers risked losing their homes as well as their livelihoods.

Chico set up a rural workers union. He encouraged workers and their families to stand in front of tractors and chainsaws to protect the trees. He wanted there to be forest reserves. In these reserves, the forest would be protected from loggers and cattle ranches. People's jobs tapping rubber or harvesting nuts could continue. His efforts to protect workers became an effort to save the rainforest itself. He won support from the World Bank and the U.S. Congress. Finally, he persuaded the Brazilian government to set up the first reserve in 1988.

Despite international support, Chico was making enemies at home. Many people were angry with what he was doing and he received death threats. He appealed to the police for help. However,



sadly he was killed by a rancher on 22nd December 1988 at the age of 44. He was the 90th activist killed that year.

The fight for the Amazon continues. Deforestation is actually increasing not decreasing. Activists still have to fight hard to try and make sure the rainforest is protected.

## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What does *extracted* mean?
2. Find and copy a word which means *unable to read or write*.
3. What is another word for *hazards*?
4. What is meant by the word *livelihoods*?
5. Who are *rural workers*?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**S**

What challenges did rubber tappers face?

**S**

How did Chico Mendes' methods of protecting the rainforest change over time?

**R**

Which organisations supported the establishment of reserves?

**R**

When was the first reserve established?

**I**

What sort of person do you think Chico Mendes was? Give evidence from the text.