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Açaí could help save the rainforest

By Clarisse Douaud

12/12/2006 - **Not all açaí is ethically equal, according to one distributor, but managed the right way the industry for this Amazonian superfruit could protect the endangered rainforest and bring about positive social development in the region.**

Açaí berries (pronounced ah-sigh-ee) have long formed part of the staple diet of Indian tribes in the Amazon basin. With the appearance of a purple grape and taste of a tropical berry, it has been shown to have powerful antioxidant properties thanks to a high level of anthocyanins, pigments that are also present in red wine.

In the late 1990s, açaí began its appearance in North America due in large part to trendy juice bars and nutraceutical beverages. This trend looks set to grow: in November, Mintel identified the "Amazonia movement" as a key trend for 2007.

According to Jon Wisniewski, general manager of pulp extractor [Nu Fruits of the Amazon](#), the fruit has a potential role in protecting the region's eco-diversity by boosting the local economy and social conditions.

While Wisniewski acknowledges that exporting açaí from the Amazon to other parts of the world can rack up significant food miles, he told [NutraIngredients-USA.com](#) that this may be a worthwhile sacrifice towards sustaining an industry that can give locals motivation to protect the forest that is a vital organ of the world's ecosystem.

The [World Wildlife Fund](#) estimates the Amazon rainforest holds approximately 30 percent of the world's plant species. The Amazon River is also the world's largest water basin with a flow volume equal to 20 percent of the joint volume of all rivers on the planet.

Yet according to Brazilian government estimates, the Amazon forest will have lost 25 percent of its original area by 2020. This would be disastrous not only for the ecosystem of the region, but for the world's climate.

Logging, and the unsustainable farming that leads to more logging, has been erasing large swaths of the rainforest as migrants exploit the land as a means to earning a living. Cattle ranching and soybean farming are the two main industries for which trees are cleared.

And, according to Wisniewski, until locals are given a financial and social incentive to keep the forest standing, no amount of rules and regulations can stop this destruction.

While some ethically responsible suppliers are willing to pay a premium price for the berries to ensure they are being harvested in an environmentally and socially sustainable way, not all businesses are so bothered about sustainability, he said.

Wisniewski said a potential solution to this problem could be açaí plantations. To date, the berry has only been wild harvested and bought by the basket by manufacturing plants from river dwellers.

"We have the potential to take this fruit and breed it and create something exceptional," he said. "That's our end goal."

Nu Fruits of the Amazon says it support manufacturers that pay a higher wage to their workers than others, or that give back to their workers through projects such as running a school for the worker's children.

"At the end of the day Brazil's biggest problem is corruption and the only way you can change that is through education," said Wisniewski, whose career has included a spell in the country's forestry industry.

Nu only works with suppliers who work via ethical means, or who are on their way to establishing such practices. In turn, the company has developed an 'Amazon-friendly' stamp which some clients use on their products.

"Ethical products can command a premium," said Wisniewski. *"However, the trick is to feed that back to the people where it is meant to have the effect."*

While the Amazonian [acai](#) industry has the potential to save parts of the rainforest by ensuring it does not get cut down, Wisniewski does fear that if demand increases beyond a certain level it will have a negative effect on the locals who rely on the fruit for consumption.

In the capital city of Belem, where much of the company's acai is sourced, an estimated 400,000 litres of acai is consumed per day by the city's 1.2 million inhabitants.

"Most exporters don't care and just figure locals can pay more for," Wisniewski. *"But the fact is that locals can't necessarily afford it."*

Based primarily in New Zealand, Nu was established in 2004. In the first year of business it exported 100 tonnes of acai pulp, and currently ships between 400 and 500 tonnes per year. Wisniewski expected this to double in the near future.