



CHICO MENDES

At the age of ten years Chico Mendes began working as a rubber tapper (slitting bark to obtain the rubber from the tree) and later became a leader with the rubber tappers union in Xapuri, North West Brazil to fight against the exploitation of the workers.

In 1969, the Brazilian Government brought in legislation that they hoped would allow areas of the forest to be developed, which they hoped would relieve the dire economic and social problems facing the country. These problems were partly due to the huge debts they owed to the developed countries. However, as a result, wealthy landowners bought up the land and cashed in on the attractive government grants and cleared the land for grazing cattle.

Chico Mendes argued that this was destruction and not development because it upset the delicate balance of nature that exists in the Amazon. Without the trees the land would dry up and die and cause long lasting environmental damage locally and globally. He argued that the landowners were making a quick profit at the expense of future generations. Mendes set about organising the rubber tappers into obstructing the deforestation by organising *emportes*, where large groups of people literally stand in the way of bulldozers. Over thirteen years, forty-five *emportes* were held, saving three million acres of forest. Mendes was also instrumental in establishing education for tappers where they were taught about issues relevant to their own situation. He set up workers' co-operatives, allowing the tappers to benefit more from their own labour.

In recognition for his work, he was awarded the *Global 500 prize* by the United Nations, and received the medal from the *Society for a Better World* in 1988. Chico Mendes' vision was to see the Amazon region economically viable for all. Sadly, he was killed at 5.45pm on Thursday 22nd December 1988 by the hired guns of the wealthy landowners he spoke out against.