

Profile: Tathiana Chaves de Souza – Mission Alignment and Connection to Citizens in the Brazilian Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (Forest Ranger)

“What direction I should point my energy... if I want to contribute to a fairer world?”

Tathiana Chaves de Souza is an environmental analyst – a “Forest Ranger” - for Brazil’s environmental administration, the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation. A biologist by training, she also has a master’s in environmental engineering and works in both biodiversity conservation and “participative environmental management.”

As discussed in the last chapter, many bureaucrats enter the civil service because they care about doing useful things for their society. Tathiana is a case in point - “I felt in my heart that I was seeking to serve a greater purpose. I would like to dedicate my life energy to a noble cause.”

Public service has allowed Tathiana to realize her desire to follow a "path to improve people's quality of life; for environmental balance, associated with people's well-being and dignity, and thus, at the same time, ensure the promotion of nature conservation with social justice.” When she thinks about how her passion fits into a greater purpose, she thinks of “the rational use of natural resources, with respect to different lifestyles, getting to know different cultures, different traditions, and to see ourselves as a part of the whole.”

Her story starts in the central western part of the state of Pará, in the Brazilian Amazon at an ecological station called Terra do Meio. She was attracted to this agency because its mission point was aligned with her “dream to dedicate [herself] to biodiversity conservation and to work with nature protection.” From the start, her relationship with her work was almost spiritual. “I tried to make myself at the service of something bigger, something that I consider beautiful, noble, and just.”

But Tathiana was faced with a tense and difficult reality in Terra do Meio: the government had created a protected area in the name of biodiversity conservation without the engagement and support of the vulnerable people living in the region – traditional populations and family farmers - who would be impacted by the creation of the protected area. The public consultation was short-lived, and demands for change by the marginalized local communities living in the protected areas were not met. As a result, there was “huge resistance to the recognition of the Conservation Unit” from the local community. Many farmers say they were “violently coerced to leave” from land they had lived on for years. The actions and approach of the state thus caused “trauma in the small family farmers.”

Public land clearance, which was targeted at large public landholders who were responsible for large deforestation but also impacted small family farmers, was not the only issue. While attempting to crack down on the now illegal uses of the protected land, the government destroyed bridges and highways that represented the only access points for people living in the area. “One father came to me to tell me that his recently born baby caught malaria and he wasn’t able to take the baby to the hospital” because of the blocked roads, Tathiana remembers.

Even without the failures of the previous government, the conditions of Tathiana's role would never have been easy. "It was a lawless land and there was a lot of mineral extraction... a lot of deforestation... it was a dangerous place to be" and Tathiana went around the area with police protection until she had gained the trust and respect of its residents. The government had put up park signs around the ecological station to demarcate the boundaries of the protected area that had not been agreed upon by the people living in the region. Tathiana remembers, "six months later you'll find that there are gunshot marks on the signs." Beyond "fighting illegal actions, we were also dealing with land regularization by trying to identify the legitimate occupants of public lands."

The role also came with great personal sacrifice – it meant Tathiana had less time to visit her son, who lived with his father in a different region. "It was a very high cost for me to be away from my child. I needed to make that time count, I needed to make it important, so it was worth being away from my kid." What's more, Tathiana spent most of her time alone; "I was the only servant deployed at the second largest federal conservation unit in the country of Brazil. It has 3 million hectares. One servant deployed to manage all of this space."

Tathiana's mission motivation sustained her as she worked closely with local people (*ribeirinhos*, who are riverside residents and family farmers), their representatives and key partners (especially NGOs, educational, and research institutions), and committed staff at all levels of the Institute and the Federal Public Ministry of Altamira. Tathiana was determined to "create a pact with those [communities] involved" and suggested hiring local inhabitants to recover protected areas that were degraded, generating income and involving them directly in conservation services. She also wanted them to be part of research projects that tested new methodologies aimed at better land use, and she invited locals to join the management council of the park. Tathiana hired "three planes to go fetch those councilors of the Conservation Unit inside the park, from those conflicted areas, to bring them to our meeting twice a year."

Despite the challenging work environment, the loneliness, and personal sacrifices, Tathiana was excited by the prospect of enacting her agency's mission. She felt "very honored to serve my country" and saw the job as an opportunity to rectify the "omission and slow pace of the public power" and to protect nature while "caring for human rights and dignity and the dignity people deserve." The central conservation challenge of Terra do Meio had historically been framed as local people working against the conservation of this rich, natural place. But Tathiana thought differently: "maybe they are working against conservation because there is no investment in the farmers for transitory or permanent solutions." It was her chance to promote "a more legitimate dialogue, to build consensus and create alternative pathways within the public power" itself, and to place citizens and nature at the heart of the conservation work.

Tathiana also kept the government coordinators constantly updated on "what I was doing, what feedback I was getting from the families, and even what impact we were having on the environment." In the beginning, meetings between the government and local representatives were very hostile, but "in the end, we had the Chico de Mendes Institute, the police, the firefighters, the researchers and the farmers, the family farmers and everybody holding hands together in a circle and local people were opening the meeting." Building trusting relationships with both the community members who live in Terra do Meio and her colleagues at the Chico Mendes Institute ensured shared ownership of an ecologically friendly management and joint decision-making. It

wasn't just the farmers who benefitted from this close collaboration, the environment did, too. "There was a relationship between the reduction of the impact of deforestation along the time when we built this dialogue and when we held mutual commitments, mutual agreements." Mission motivation and broader community collaboration often go together, as we'll discuss later on.

Unfortunately, with the successive changes in government, in guidelines, and in the board of directors, "the political will changed, so everything that I had been building very carefully...all of that was abandoned, filed." The new land agreements for the use and temporary occupation of land that Tathiana and the local community had worked on with so much dedication could not be finalized. The agreement with the *ribeirinhos* was the only one signed several years later. The lack of closure of the agreement that Tathiana had built with the family farmers caused the local community to lose faith in the government and in her as a manager.

Like many mission driven individuals, Tathiana believed she was "tireless." However, when faced with constant setbacks and a job that no longer allowed her to have the positive impact she desired, she eventually needed to take a break from the work that she loved. Thwarted in her desire to protect nature and the local community, and lacking the control to influence the government's politics, she decided "I really needed a change of landscape and I left with a heavy heart."

Tathiana *is* a civil servant who wants to continue "seeing solutions to challenging and complex problems," but to do the work that she believes matters, she needs to work at an agency with a mission point that aligns with her values. The conditions that caused Tathiana to burn out are likely to also demotivate other mission driven bureaucrats, like we saw in the last chapter.

After five years of service in Terra do Meio, Tathiana moved to Brasilia to work in research and biodiversity monitoring; she felt she could have a different kind of impact in her new role. Her exit from the field was not caused by a "lack of commitment to something bigger than myself," rather it was an attempt to keep herself in a "virtuous spiral" when the work itself was sustaining of her motivation. She hopes that the government context will eventually change and she will once again be able to bring "happiness and enthusiasm and light-heartedness to find solutions" in this work.