



## Cultivating açai palms where they belong<sup>(1)</sup>

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**Abstract** — While global demand for açai (*Euterpe oleracea*) is booming and Brazil remains its major exporter, productivity from traditional centers is curbed at subsistence, extractive levels. Although fertile floodplains were the cradle of civilization and some have been sustainably cultivated for millennia, farming the Amazon floodplain is increasingly taboo. Despite burgeoning markets, traditional açai producers are expected to limit themselves to the minimum impact management of native populations. Shaded and scattered amidst the flooded forest canopy, the palms grow tall and thin, making harvesting labor-intensive, precarious and costly, as palm-tree climbers use to charge half of the gross yield. Planting in full light can lower this cost, tackle seasonality and keep up with the demand. However, plantations are proscribed where the açai palm is endemic and thrives, pushing entrepreneurs to non-flooded areas where stressed plants are more susceptible to pests and diseases. Moreover, even under careful irrigation regimes, some plantations are showing productivity decline of berries deemed too “dry” by local markets. Apart from the environmental damage of creating floodplain-like substitutes, irrigation and fertilization costs are prohibitive for the average farmer. Consequently, the supply chain is shifting from a historically local economy to a capital-intensive, corporation controlled venture. It is not too late to reverse this trend and save the açai from the fate of other cornerstone Amazonian species now relegated to ecolabel niches. But doing so requires emancipating floodplain dwellers from their subsistence stigma to responsibly cultivate this most productive environment.

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