

A vanishing forest reborn

 rolex.org/rolex-awards/milestones/environment/laury-cullen-jr



Laury Cullen Jr.



Working with dedicated farming families, Laury Cullen Jr. is restoring Brazil's Atlantic Forest while contributing to the local economy and helping to fight climate change.

Corridors of new hope wend like delicate green tendrils through the open farming landscape of Pontal, Brazil. Prowled by ocelots, pumas and tapirs, these slender forest passages form links in a chain of renewal – for threatened wildlife, an all-but destroyed rainforest and the region's poor farmers and their families.

Published in March 2021 © Time to read: **5min 11s**

When forester Laury Cullen Jr. first moved to Pontal do Paranapanema in São Paulo state in the 1990s to study an endangered species of monkey, the black lion tamarin, more than 80 per cent of the once-mighty Mata Atlântica, Brazil's vast Atlantic Forest, was gone. Felled for timber and cleared for farming, its removal had come at a devastating price to many native animals and plants, most of which are not to be found anywhere else on Earth.

“When we first arrived in the Pontal region, and seeing the landscape from satellites, we realized that most of the remaining wildlife had zero chance of survival in the long term,” Cullen recalls. “It is a highly fragmented landscape and the Atlantic Forest fragments are very isolated from the remaining parks.”

Three decades on and the march of human progress has taken a hopeful turn. Corridors and islands of forest are springing up anew, tended by the caring hands of farming families who today earn a better living from the intermingled trees, wildlife, dairy cattle and crops – such as coffee, corn and cassava – than they were able to from agriculture alone.

Pontal is “a very special place”, Cullen says. Its semi-deciduous forest, linking the dry savannah of the Cerrado and the rainforest of the western Mata Atlântica, makes it a fountainhead for biodiversity. “You have, for example, the maned wolf which is endemic to the Cerrado, you have the black lion tamarins, which are specific to the rainforest. At the same time, you have species such as jaguars, pumas and ocelots, birds, bats and amphibians. It is truly a hotspot, created by this blending of two ecosystems, the Atlantic Forest and the Cerrado.”

Today, the imperilled wildlife shares the landscape with a sizeable human population, relocated to the region in a land resettlement scheme. They, in many ways, hold the key to whether or not it can survive, Cullen believes.

The Dream Map is like trying to rescue or to recover the history of the landscape but also remembering that we have 6,000 families settled in its area. Laury Cullen Jr.

To inspire the farmers, he invented a ‘Dream Map’, a scientifically based plan to restore 60,000 hectares of vanishing forest along with its animals, linking the isolated fragments of the old forest so wildlife can move between them.

“The Dream Map is like trying to rescue or to recover the history of the landscape but also remembering that we have 6,000 families settled in its area. So we have the people, the forest, the landscape and the species. We have to combine all of these in the same conservation equation,” he explains.

The Rolex Award for Enterprise that Cullen received in 2004 enabled him to involve local landless people for the work of reforestation and to establish the first of 12 community tree nurseries – many of them run by women – that produce the seedlings of more than 100 types

of native tree species. To ease pressure on the land, the programme also seeks innovative ways to raise the farmers' incomes so they are no longer forced to clear land.

Every single tree that we plant is produced by the local people in the community-based nurseries. Laury Cullen Jr.

“Every single tree that we plant is produced by the local people in the community-based nurseries,” Cullen says. “They are the ones who do the planting and all of the monitoring, so it is a great opportunity to provide jobs and food security for the rural poor. Their eyes are bright, their eyes are shining, they are having a better quality of life – and that has to do with food security. So there is a very great sense of gratitude, pride and realization of success.”

He stresses that without the engagement of the local people, his programme would not exist. “We could not save this last remaining forest if people were not a key component of the long-term conservation and community-based conservation approach.” In this respect especially, his vision differs from the traditional concept of national parks and nature reserves where farming is excluded. Here, it is completely integrated with restoration.

“I think it has to do with pride and trust. Trust is the glue that holds the relationship between us and the local people. When trust exists, communication is easy, instant and makes life easy.”

Since it began, Cullen's Dream Map has guided the restoration of 2,000 hectares of forest and the planting of four million trees, and generated US\$2 million for the local economy. In contrast to other regions where land clearing persists, this expanse of renewal is now also helping the world to combat climate change by locking up 800,000 tonnes of carbon every year.

The Dream Map epitomizes many of the ideals that inspire Rolex's Perpetual Planet initiative. It ventures boldly into new fields of landscape restoration, preserving the past while helping to build the future for the communities it affects, all the time discovering fresh ways to perpetuate our world.

A quarter of a century of hands-on experience has convinced Cullen that his is a model that can be followed anywhere in the world to help regreen our planet.

PUBLISHED IN 2004

RECREATING THE EMERALD GREEN FOREST
