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Pedro and his palms shall save us from the climate disaster

Far out on the Colombian savannah, a man named Pedro Gonfrier cultivates palms, which can turn us away from the climate disaster. If anyone wants to buy the biodiesel made from palm oil. In the world, biodiesel is still perceived as equal to endangered animals and burned rainforests. However, for Pedro, it is about being sustainable - and about creating a Colombia that is associated with something else than drug cartels and murderous guerrillas.

During a stopover in Villavicencio, a not very tall man boards our little two-engine Piper aircraft. He honestly looks annoying slick. Spotless white shorts, soft casual shoes and a wide-brimmed hat adorned with a band of horsehair.

He could easily slip into an advertisement for wristwatches or Colombian rum.

The man sits down beside me and does not say a word as we fly over the flat endless savannah. Dried riverbeds draw their patterns through the brown grass. Here and there, I sometimes see herds of white cattle.

Half an hour later we plant the wheels on a strip of red gravel far into nowhere. It is a cattle farm. What do we do on a cattle farm?

I still have a warning from a biomass professor in my head. I talked with him shortly before leaving for Colombia because I would like to check out something about greenhouse gases before I left for the Los Llanos plain. I did not know much about climate change.

"We're more or less in panic when we think about cattle," said the professor.

"All that can be done to displace the cattle is good!"

"This is especially true for cattle that is grazing outside."

It's a pity to eat meat, especially beef, unless you crave typhoons, floods and similar disasters that come with the rising temperatures. So much, I have understood. Ruminants are major producers of greenhouse gas.

In other words, we have landed in an environmental hell. And there, in a cloud of red dust, the cattle farmer Gabriel Jaramillo stands and receives us laughing warmheartedly.

Formerly, Gabriel Jaramillo was, among other things, director of Brazil's second largest bank. Now he is retired and lives in New York.

When he started to get bored, he bought this piece of land in his old country of birth, Colombia, and began to study cattle breeding.

Now he has 6,400 cattle walking on an area that approximately corresponds to Amager.

"The natural grass on the savannah is without nutrition. That's why there are no giraffes here. Moreover, it has looked like this in millions of years. Nothing has been able to live here," says the farmer, as he drives us around in his big four-wheel drive.

"The only change is the grass I've sown. It is full of protein. "

The silent spotless man in the wide-shaded hat is always nearby. I still have not figured out what his role is.

He listened carefully when Gabriel Jaramillo says something.

Jaramillo enthusiastically states that he has been in perfect balance with nature. Or, he actually enriches nature. With the latest technology. Also, the local Indians are satisfied, he claims. And the animals in the strips of jungle along the rivers. Even the jaguars are happy!

We stop and jump out to look at a bunch of cattle that graze on some of the protein-grazed grass. They certainly look like they are in complete balance.

Perhaps we should try to disturb the idyll with a question:

What about climate change?

"Yes, there is no doubt that gas is getting out of the gaps on these animals," admits Gabriel Jaramillo, without any sign that this fact is disturbing his mood.

It's not so much the fart that's the problem, he teaches me. It is rather the eructation. However, because his cattle - or the meat machines, which he unsentimentally calls the genetically improved creatures - get the right grass, they belch less than other cattle. They emit less methane gas.

What do you really think about oil palms?

For the first time, Gabriel Jaramillo hesitates. Maybe because he cannot figure out where that question comes from.

"I see no problem with oil palms. They are good for the CO2 accounts," he says.

But there are at least shared opinions about whether oil palms are good for the CO2 accounts.

Just this question is the reason the photographer and I have travelled the long way.

"And the palms create employment," adds the cattle farmer. "And yes, as you see, so ...".

He nods towards the vast landscape.

"... there is enough space for us all here in Los Llanos ...".

Then we have had enough of the cattle farms.

We leave farewell to Gabriel Jaramillo and get into another four-wheel drive. The man with the wide-brimmed hat sits behind the wheel. His name is Pedro. Pedro Gonfrier.

It is not far from the cattle farm to the palm plantation, but it takes several hours on the miserable road full of potholes. It's dark when we arrive.

But biodiesel is dangerous!

Only at breakfast next day, I realize that Pedro Gonfrier is the daily manager of El Cimarrón, which is the name of the plantation. He has now put on more practical clothes, but the hat lays on the table.

The sky is pale blue with thin dots of clouds. We are in the shadow of a half-roof on the main building. At the back, there are two rows of low white houses where the workers live. Further away are some larger buildings with tractors and other machines.

Under a large mango tree and just a few yards from a crowd of black vulture, a dog with doubtful pedigree lay. The women in the kitchen provide us with fresh coffee on a regular basis.

»If you feel this place is isolated, you should have experienced it in the past. There were no roads at all. Everyone had a small Cessna plane, "said Pedro, who starts to thaw up.

'All' is so an overstatement. Probably the people with most money had Cessna aircraft. For example, Pedro's family. Livestock farmers through 4 generations. His great-grandfather had a large numbers of cattle distributed on several farms in Los Llanos including Vichada, as this department on the border with Venezuela is called.

But we are not here because of all these cattle. We are here because of climate change. We know that on El Cimarrón they grow oil palms for the production of biodiesel. In order for us not to burn off so much devastating fossil fuels on the highways.

No, for the heck, many will surely object. Not biodiesel!

Biodiesel is similar to burning rainforests! Endangered species! Sliced orangutans! Biodiesel increases CO2 emissions! Biodiesel just makes everything worse! Forget about biodiesel!

The miserable reputation derives mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia, where most oil palms are grown. It is true that it has dramatic consequences for the CO2 accounts to burn rainforests to make room for oil palm trees.

When the wood is burned, tons of carbon dioxide are released, which have been bound in dense forests for thousands of years. It blows directly into the atmosphere and contributes to climate change. Contributes greatly!

Biodiesel from oil palms has such a bad reputation that it also goes beyond people trying to produce the oil in a sustainable manner. People like Pedro Gonfrier.

"When someone thinks of palm oil, they think of Malaysia and Indonesia and on rainforest that disappears. So we have to demonstrate the difference between their and our production methods. "

And how is it possible to deliver sustainable palm oil?

"Well ... First of all, we do not cut down forest or jungle here in Colombia to plant palm trees. We are fortunate enough to have enough land available. Lots of flat areas. Most palms are planted in areas where other crops have been cultivated. Rice, maize or grass for cattle".

Some forests may have disappeared in other places of Colombia, but not here in Los Llanos. Here the forest is concentrated along the rivers. Furthermore, the soil on the vast deserted areas has been too sour to make it a matter of farming. Except for livestock farming.

"We humans constantly try to go against nature. We are trying to introduce bison oxen on the North Pole. But it is about cultivating animals and plants that fit the environment, "said Pedro.

"And the oil palm is good for the tropics."

We went to Colombia to find out if he is right.

It's not just about money

"The world is moving at a faster pace than the environment can absorb. Everything is going to be faster and bigger ... "philosophes Pedro, as we drive some time later over the flat savannah. And then they suddenly stand in long ranks, the palms.

They look funny because the crowns are fully developed with cascades of fan-shaped leaves. The trunk also have the thickness they should have. But they are only about 1 meter tall. Dwarf palms.

They look like full-grown palms that are hammered so far down the ground that only the crowns stick up.

That's because it's young palms. Planted 4-5 years ago.

I sit in the backseat with Henrik Wiig, a Norwegian economist and businessman who works closely with the Norwegian-owned company Prestige, who owns this palm plantation. It is Henrik Wiig's task to sell palm oil out to the world through the company C2Biotrade, and he has arranged the trip to Los Llanos and El Cimarrón.

In the first place, Prestige has planted 600 hectares of oil palm trees. As a pilot project. If it works out well, the Norwegians dream of expanding to 60,000 hectares. About the same area as Bornholm.

"We call the 2-3 dry months of the year the stress period," says Henrik Wiig, as we sit and consider the wilted landscape through the car window.

"If we irrigated in the dry periods, we could harvest more. But it's expensive. And we would have to take water from the river. Or from wells ...".

"But we can earn money without irrigation," says Pedro Gonfrier, who is increasingly coming into character.

"When looking at costs, it's not just about the wallet, but also about the environment. I have to feel well with what I do. You cannot squeeze things too much. "

For Pedro, it is not just about cultivating palm trees.

It is about reversing the development of a country that has been characterized by violence and conflicts over the decades. Colombia is still the world's largest producer of cocaine. And although the government has concluded a peace agreement with the country's largest guerrilla army, Farc, there are still many armed groups who earn fortunes on drug trafficking, smuggling and extortion.

Pedro has only contempt for Farc, now transformed into a political party. "They acted like terrorists" says the Colombian.

It's like being married

I go with Pedro Gonfrier in between the palms to check if the workers have harvested the red oiled fruits in the right way. Fruit bunches lie in the grass and wait for a tractor with a trailer to come and collect them.

"It is important to cut as much of the stalk as possible. And then the fruit must not be overripe," explains Pedro.

He has studied economics in Spain and worked for 3 years in a large energy company in Düsseldorf. Because of the uncertain political situation in Colombia he would not be too dependent on the cattle industry. The family has always been prepared to lose its farms.

But after 10 years in Europe, Pedro is back in Colombia. And has thrown himself into the palm business.

The palm industry is not for those who are excited about fast solutions. When the palms are planted, you have to wait 4 years to harvest. You have to build an oil mill to extract the raw palm oil from the fruit.

"Once you have planted a seed, you will have to hang on for at least 20 years if you want something out of it. To grow palms is like being married. You're hanging onto her the whole life ... "said Pedro.

Palm oil is used for both food and biodiesel. Right now, the Norwegian owned company is focusing on biodiesel, especially for the European market. But the competition is tough.

"It is very difficult. In Europe, you try to replace palm oil with other kinds of oil that you manufacture yourself. Like rapeseed and sunflower. They try to take over the market or limit our share. "

"Therefore, as a producer, you have to be very productive. And very sustainable, "says Pedro.

He bends over a fruit bunch with a white coat on.

"It's just a little sponge. Nothing bad, he analyses."

Three bullets for the woman

Cesar Paz comes from the city of Tumaco in western Colombia, not far from the border with Ecuador. Here he cultivated coca leaves, says Cesar, when one night we sit on the porch in front of his house.

Like the rest of the more than 60 workers at El Cimarrón, he lives in a small room in one of the low buildings that spread out in the terrain.

It was very dangerous to grow coca leaves, says Cesar Paz. The state's control of the coca farmers became increasingly intense, so the cultivation moved farther and further away into increasingly impenetrable areas.

His children and brothers still live in Tumaco. But not his wife. Twelve years ago, the family was torn apart.

"My nephew was soldier in the army, and when he gave my wife a hug, Farc believed that she had something to do with the army. One day they knocked on the door at eight o'clock in the evening. I opened the door and asked, "What do you want?" "

On the porch are also two men playing cards. A couple of other men are watching. Perhaps they listen to Cesar, who talks with a quiet but solid voice, as if he has told this story over and over again.

"They were three guerrilla soldiers in Farc uniforms. They carried weapons. Two of them stood on either side of the door. "We just want to talk to your wife," said the third. "Why?". "Because she's informing the army" ... One of them entered the house and said to my wife: "We have been ordered to take you to our commander." "Can I not even talk to my nephew?" Asked my wife. "I have no contact with the military!"".

"Then one of those standing outside pulled his gun. He shot her three times ... "

Cesar has no problems in remembering the details.

"One bullet in the forehead. One in the throat. One in the chest ... "

Their three children were at the time 9, 11 and 12 years old. Until they became old enough to fend for themselves, they lived with family. Cesar sees them a couple of times a year. The oldest has just finished his military service.

"It's very hard to live where I come from. There are problems with police, military, guerrilla and drug cartels. If you are good friends with one, you will be unfamiliar with the other. If you live on one side of the river, do not move on the other side ... "says Cesar Paz.

It was the fear that made him move away. He took work in palm plantations to support his children. But he also left his hometown because he was afraid of losing his mind. Because of the killing of the woman. Now he has become a specialist in cutting oil palms.

"It's 100 percent better to live here. Just look how I live. It's like a hotel. The food is mostly okay. And here's all quiet! "

We can do it right

Now, the wide-brimmed hat really makes sense, I think, as I step out of the shadow of the palms with Pedro Gonfrier. We stop and speak on in the merciless sun.

Pedro talks about how important it is for him to change as little as possible of the ecosystem on the savannah.

"When nature places something on your plate, the challenge is to use it in the right way. The palm allows you to intervene in a minimal way... "

Why does nature mean so much to you?

"You have to think of your children ..." he answers.

And then he takes a glance out in the horizon.

"Other countries have developed by cutting down forests, by drilling for oil and, at all, doing whatever suited them because no one at that time worried about nature. You make biodiesel of soybeans and people seem indifferent about the fact that soybean sucks everything out of the environment. "

We are very far away from the silent man in the Piper plane. It's almost a lecture Pedro Gonfrier has given us.

"Now it seems to be our turn to develop ourselves, to industrialize. But there are a lot of eyes resting on us. There are a lot of rules set for us that are very difficult to live up to. It's a big challenge. "

But you have the chance to do it differently?

"Yes, but not only because we are forced. We want to do it in the right way. When you work in these areas, which are still relatively untouched, you have a heavy responsibility resting on your shoulders. You do not want to sit 20 years ahead and think: What was the matter with that piece of land? What happened to the river that is no longer water? Do you understand? ... '.

They kidnapped and they murdered

Elsewhere in Colombia, large agro companies have chased peasants away from their land to grow palm trees.

"Certainly not always peaceful," recognizes Pedro.

"The thing is that land here in Colombia has a great social value. And a cultural value. It's very hard to deal such with in a country with so many conflicts ... "

It is said that all conflicts in Colombia originate from land?

"It's an important component. But I do not think it's the most important. Above all, the drug industry that has initiated the conflicts. People were first started to be kicked out from their land when the drug industry grew large. So that they could grow coca... "

The sound of the sharp knives, the workers use to cut the oil fruit, reaches us from somewhere in between the palms. Chop, chop.

"I'm sure you can find money from drug traffickers and paramilitary groups everywhere. They spend their money in land and cattle and supermarkets. Recently they found out that a large supermarket chain was owned by Farc. So they could launder money, "said Pedro.

You really do not like Farc?

"I do not like any kind of violent business. We've suffered too much in my generation. In all generations ... "

Have you lost someone who you was close to?

"FARC kidnapped uncles and cousins to extort. Friends of my school days was kidnapped and some of their relatives was killed by guerrilla. It's very hard to find someone in Colombia that has not been hit. At least if you belong to a family in the countryside".

So for Pedro, the oil palms are not just about doing something about climate change. Or to make money. It is also a matter of giving people in the country an alternative to cultivating coca or putting on a guerrilla uniform.

A counterweight to violence and drugs.

It's okay on the savannah

Yet not all is completely sustainable at El Cimarrón. Work still needs to be done on some details.

For example, crude palm oil in the ideal CO2 world should sail down the river to the ports in Venezuela, but it is neither practical nor political possible today. So the oil is trucked in tankers to refineries in the capital Bogotá and elsewhere.

But the crucial thing is that they do not burn forests to give room for the palms.

And after a few days at El Cimarrón we crawl on board the little Piper aircraft and take a turn over the palm plantation as we leave, it's clear that you do not need to burn anything.

There is enough space.

"Oil palms are generally bad," said the biomass professor to me before the trip to Colombia. His name is Claus Felby and is from the University of Copenhagen.

"But it's not the same as it cannot be done right. If you plant them on some grass or savannah, then it's okay. "

TRAVEL DECLARATION

The Norwegian company Prestige paid the travel from Bogota to El Cimarrón in Colombia. The company had no influence on the content of the article.

Text to photos

JOB. It takes many hands to grow oil palms. Should the Norwegian owners of El Cimarrón meet the dream of planting 60,000 hectares, then there are jobs for 6,000 workers.

THE COUNTRYSIDE. Los Llanos plain is flat like a pancake. The ideal place to grow oil palms if you do not like to eradicate rainforest and animal species.

THE BOSS. 40-year-old Pedro Gonfrier is the daily leader of palm plantation El Cimarrón.

CATTLE. The only thing that breaks the monotony is the creatures and the scattered chaparro trees.

THE PALMS. One must be equipped with a good deal of patience and a solid cash treasure to start growing oil palms. The oily fruit can only be harvested after the palms are 4 years old. The palm tree can grow up to 30 meters high. Palmeolien is used for both food, cosmetics and biodiesel.

LANDSBYEN: Many of the workers at El Cimarrón come from the village of Nueva Antioquia. Although the town is not many kilometers from the plantation, the trip takes at least an hour on the miserable road. Therefore, the workers usually only travel home on weekends. These three men work in the oil mill.

THE OIL EXTRACTION PLANT. The Norwegian owners of El Cimarrón have also built an oil mill where the oil is squeezed out of the fruit and becomes the raw palm oil, which can be refined and become biodiesel. Half of the Colombian palm oil is exported to Europe.

THE COCA GROWER. Cesar Paz, 44, is from western Colombia. He cultivated coconut trees for a drug cartel until three guerrilla soldiers knocked on and destroyed his life. Now he tries to put it back together among the palms in a more peaceful corner of the country. Cesar Paz specializes in cutting oil palms.

WORKERS. Helena Gutierrez Sucre (at the back) is 27 years old and works at El Cimarrón. She lived for a good five years in another city, because there were no jobs at home. Now she is back in Nueva Antioquia with her parents and two siblings who also work in the palm plantation.

Translated 25. April, three fact/statement in the original Danish text corrected.