



Solar Electric Light Fund

Powering a Brighter 21st Century

PRESS RELEASE

Solar power and satellite Internet access introduced to remote settlement in Brazilian rainforest to improve health, education, and economic opportunity for Caboclo Indians, and to strengthen scientific research.

WASHINGTON, DC — March 13, 2002 — In a first-of-its-kind project, the Solar Electric Light Fund (SELF), a U.S. non-profit organization that promotes the use of solar energy in the developing world, has teamed with the Amazon Association, a conservation and sustainable development NGO based in Brazil and Italy, and OnSat Network Communications, to bring solar power and broadband wireless Internet access to the isolated Xixuaú-Xipariná Ecological Reserve in the heart of Brazil's Amazon rainforest.

In addition to a satellite dish, the new solar panels provide electricity for refrigerators for vaccines and snakebite anti-venom, a medical diagnostic device that can upload information to the Internet for use in telemedicine, new computers and lights at a just-built school for local children, and a pump to deliver fresh water from the Rio Jauaperí. Previously, power needs at the Reserve were met with an improvised — and unreliable — combination of kerosene, diesel, and wood. Making use of the Internet or e-mail meant a forty-hour boat ride to the nearest population center, the city of Manaus.

Situated in one of the most pristine parts of the Amazon rainforest, the Xixuaú-Xipariná Ecological Reserve is home to several hundred Caboclo Indians, as well as a rich biodiversity that includes manatees, dolphins, black caymen, harpy eagles, jaguar, spider monkeys, and giant anteaters. The Reserve is the focus of wide-ranging study by a number of Brazilian and international ecologists, botanists, and zoologists.

The Solar Electric Light Fund was invited to undertake the project by the Amazon Association, a group composed largely of the Reserve's Caboclo residents, who seek to improve their quality of life without exploiting and degrading the fragile surrounding ecosystem. Solar photovoltaic power was recognized as a dependable, non-polluting energy technology that could be introduced with sensitivity to the setting, while producing electricity to meet a number of vital needs, and helping to stem a growing exodus to overcrowded, overburdened cities such as Manaus.

Solar-powered Internet access creates rich possibilities for telemedicine, distance learning, e-commerce involving locally made handicrafts, and coordination of visits by eco-tourists. It will also facilitate closer collaboration between scientists and their far-off colleagues.

"We think the project will revolutionize life here in the Reserve," says Joao Soares Gomez, a village elder. "It will mean that opportunity can come to us, rather than us pursuing it somewhere else. We can stay rooted in this place and community that we cherish, and not give up the chance for our children to be educated, or to receive good health care when they fall sick. There is strong pressure on native people to become part of a culture that treats nature as just a treasure chest to be plundered. This gives us the power to hold to our own values."

The Xixuaú-Xipariná project marks the first time that solar-powered satellite Internet access has been brought to a remote part of the Brazilian rainforest, and exemplifies how wireless power and wireless communications can help developing nations leapfrog to state-of-the-art information and communications technology. Residents of the Reserve now enjoy high-speed Internet access, and reliable power that produces no greenhouse gases or utility bills, all without laying so much as an inch of cable for power or data.

Overall leadership for the project was provided by the Washington D.C.-based Solar Electric Light Fund. Connectivity was made possible through a satellite dish installed and operated by OnSat Network Communications of Salt Lake City, Utah. Installation of the solar equipment was carried out by the Institute for Sustainable Development and Renewable Energy (IDER), a Brazilian NGO based in Fortaleza.

The project was funded through the generosity of the Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust of London, England.

It is anticipated that the initiative will serve as a model that can be replicated elsewhere in the Amazon basin, other tropical forests, and any number of pristine wilderness areas around the world.

About SELF

A non-profit organization founded in 1990, the Solar Electric Light Fund (SELF), helps developing nations power a brighter future for their people and the planet through innovative uses of solar energy. SELF has mounted demonstration projects in twelve developing nations, and has been honored with distinctions including the 1998 Green Cross Millennium Award for Environmental Leadership, presented by Global Green USA and Mikhail Gorbachev. More at www.self.org.

About the Amazon Association

The Amazon Association (Associação Amazônia) fosters the protection and study of the Xixuaú-Xipariná Ecological Reserve, and the human and economic development of the native Caboclo people. An alliance of Caboclo Indians and scientific researchers, the Association has facilitated research projects by a number of Brazilian, European and American institutions, often focused on animal species in danger of extinction elsewhere in the Amazon, such as the Brazilian giant otter. Social projects undertaken by the Association include the building of a health post and a school, and the development of opportunities for sensitive eco-tourism. More at www.amazonia.org.

About OnSat

OnSat Network Communications is a for-profit, worldwide digital communications company that provides its customers with reliable, secure, managed, satellite and wireless bi-directional and asymmetrical broadband services, including high speed Internet, video conferencing, and telephony. OnSat seeks to bridge the digital divide by providing cost-effective broadband service in areas currently underserved by traditional land-based solutions. More at www.onsatnet.com.

About IDER

IDER, the Institute for Sustainable Development and Renewable Energy, is an NGO based in Fortaleza, Brazil, that promotes use of solar and wind energy in northeastern rural Brazil. SELF partnered with IDER in an earlier project focused on solar electrification of homes in the coastal state of Ceará. To learn more, contact ider@matrix.com.br.

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