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Brazil's Belo Monte Dam: Greenwashing contested (commentary)

by [Philip M. Fearnside](#) on 1 February 2021



- *The company responsible for Brazil's Belo Monte Dam claimed in a letter to the New York Times that the company respects indigenous peoples, the environment and international conventions.*
- *The Arara indigenous people contest the company's claims and call attention to a series of broken promises.*
- *The Belo Monte Dam is notorious for its having violated international conventions and Brazilian laws regarding consultation of indigenous peoples, and for its massive environmental and social impacts.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

Even in this era of “alternative facts,” the [letter to the New York Times](#) from Norte Energy (the company responsible for Brazil's Belo Monte Dam) will surely be remembered as a classic. The letter opens by claiming that “From the beginning, the deployment of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant in the Brazilian state of Pará has been guided by respect for the local Indigenous populations and by laws, ratified protocols and conventions.” News of Norte Energia's letter reached the local indigenous populations, and they are rightly enraged. A response from the Arara People (Figure 1) is translated below. For whatever reason, the *New York Times* declined to publish it.

17 11 2020
D S T Q Q S S

Carta do povo Arara para o mundo
 Nós Indígenas Arara do Rio Iriri estamos cansados de ser enganados pela a parte Energia. Queremos respeito! Desde a chegada da usina de Belmonte, nossa situação só piorou, nesse território se transformou na balança de negócio do mundo, nossa floresta está sofrendo muito. Cada dia que passa escutamos mais barulho dos motos serras comendo o nosso território. Nosso rio está cada dia mais triste e fraco. Isso não é normal. Estamos sendo atacados por todos os lados, nunca fomos tanta necessidade. Estamos muito preocupados com futuro dos nossos filhos e netos, até quando a norte Energia vai continuar nos enganando, por que até hoje não foi realizada desintrusão da nossa terra Indígena Pachoeira seca pedimos a todos que nos ajudem a construir uma grande campanha pela defesa do nosso território.

O povo Arara nunca vai abandonar nossos territórios, nossos guerreiros não vão permitir que a nossa floresta seja destruída. Juntos vamos proteger nosso rio Iriri.

Tuukixteduy Arara Presidente da Associação Komit do povo Arara

Inaba Odo Crozo
Kacique

Importante Reunião Planejamento Outros Assuntos

Response of the Arara People to the Norte Energia [letter](#).

Letter from the Arara People to the World

We the Arara Indigenous People of the Iriri River are tired of being deceived by Norte Energia. We want respect! Ever since the Belo Monte Dam arrived, our situation has only worsened. Our territory has become the business counter of the world. Our forest is suffering a lot. With each passing day we hear more noise from chainsaws eating our territory. Our river is growing sadder and weaker every day. This is not normal. We are being attacked from all sides. We have never been in such need. We are very concerned about the future of our children and grandchildren. How long will Norte Energia continue to deceive us? Why hasn't the disintrusion [removal of invaders] of our Cachoeira Seca Indigenous Land been carried out until today? We ask everyone to help us build a great campaign for the defense of our territory.

The Arara People will never abandon our territories. Our warriors will not allow our forest to be destroyed. Together we will protect our Iriri River.

Timbektodem Arara – President of the Arara People's Association – KOWIT

Mobu Odo Arara – Chief

Norte Energia's claim of being "guided by... laws and ratified protocols and conventions" is an amazing rewrite of the [history of building Belo Monte](#) a dam that managed to be completed despite [massive efforts](#) both within Brazil and abroad, to have those conventions respected. Belo Monte violated Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization ([ILO-169](#)) and the Brazilian law ([10.088 of Nov. 5, 2019](#), formerly [5.051 of April 19, 2004](#)) that implements the convention. These require consultation of affected indigenous people to obtain their free, prior and informed consent. Note that the operative word is "affected," not "submerged." The claim was that the indigenous people did not need to be consulted because they were not under water.

Downstream of the first of the two dams that compose Belo Monte is a [100-km stretch](#) of the Xingu River from which 80% of the water flow has been diverted. Largely disappeared are the fish that sustained the populations of the two indigenous lands along this stretch, plus a third located on a tributary. Both the [ILO](#) and the [Interamerican Commission on Human Rights](#) (IACHR) of the Organization of American States recognized violation of ILO-169 by not consulting indigenous peoples impacted by Belo Monte. Over 20 cases against Belo Monte are still pending in Brazilian courts; only [one case](#) has been decided, and this was in favor of

the indigenous people. However, the [case was appealed](#) to the Supreme Court where it languished while the dam was built and has still not been judged.



Construction of Belo Monte Dam, on the Xingu river, Belo Monte Site. Altamira, Pará, Brazil.
Credit line: © Carol Quintanilha / Greenpeace

Bribes paid by construction companies for the contracts to build Belo Monte were a star feature in Brazil's "*Lava Jato*" ("Car Wash") corruption scandal, with confessions from both the [side that paid](#) and the [side that received](#). This scandal helped explain why Belo Monte was built despite the Xingu River's [long low-flow period](#) when no or very few turbines at the main powerhouse can operate ([2020 was a dramatic example](#)). [Climate change](#) will make this [worse still](#).

The Norte Energia [letter](#) asserts: "The plant has a valid operating license and generates energy for millions of Brazilians, grounded in the principles of environmental responsibility and social justice in deference to the culture of the local Indigenous populations."



Google Earth image of the Belo Monte dam in 2019.



Google Earth image of the Belo Monte dam in 2019.

Mention of the “valid operating license,” reminds one of the Federal Public Ministry in Belém describing Belo Monte as “[totally illegal](#).” The dam forced its way past multiple legal challenges by means of “[security suspensions](#),” a relict of Brazil’s military dictatorship that allows projects to go forward despite any number of illegalities if they are needed to avoid “damage to the public economy” (originally [law 4348](#) of June 26, 1964, now [law 12,016](#) of August 7, 2009).

With respect to Norte Energia’s boast that Belo Monte “generates energy for millions of Brazilians,” the dam does indeed produce electricity, although industry gets the biggest share: [only 29%](#) of Brazil’s electricity is for domestic consumption. Much more electricity would be available if the billions of dollars in subsidies that the country’s taxpayers gave Belo Monte had been used for [other options](#), such as

energy conservation, halting export of electricity in the form of [aluminum](#) and other electro-intensive products, and tapping the country's enormous wind and solar potential.



Dead trees in a canal constructed for the Belo Monte Dam project, near Altamira. Credit line:
© Daniel Beltrá / Greenpeace

Norte Energia's [letter](#) concludes that Belo Monte is “grounded in the principles of environmental responsibility and social justice.” This is certainly a most memorable “alternative fact.” The implications for environmental justice of Belo Monte and other [Amazonian dams](#) are dramatic (see here in [English](#) and [Portuguese](#)).