

Working River Coffee and Sugar



According to archeologists, populations have used the Tietê basin for at least six thousand years and for most of this time it has been used as a means of communication and as a transport artery.

Coffee was introduced in Brazil in 1727 and the crop flourished. The Tietê's importance grew in the nineteenth century when coffee became Brazil's major source of wealth because its use as a transportation channel to transport the crop made São Paulo the leading coffee producing center in the country. Coffee was shipped abroad from the port of the neighbouring city of Santos. Today, Brazil is the world's largest coffee producer.

Since the Spanish conquistadors first introduced the crop, Brazil has always been a major sugar cane producer (left). These days, this crop is seen as being increasingly important in the provision of biofuels for use in cars and other vehicles and vast tracts of land are being turned over to sugar cane plantations. Brazil is the world's largest grower of sugar cane by a long margin, and the state of São Paulo provides 60% of the country's crop.

The Tietê, with its source just 125km from São Paulo, is still a modest river when it traverses that great metropolis. Inland however it becomes a substantial water course and is navigable for about 450km over its lower reaches before it joins the Paraná at the artificial lake behind the Jupia Dam.

The Tietê has nine hydroelectric dams along its course, the earliest of which was built in the 1920s. Most have installed locks or floodgate systems to make navigation possible on the river.

One unforeseen problem of these dams is the increased numbers of piranha in the area. Dams slow the flow of rivers, and cause an increase in piranha numbers because the fish favour gentle stretches of water for breeding. Over the years, numerous stories of people being attacked and eaten by ferocious schools of piranhas have surfaced.

The Tietê-Paraná waterway allows navigation along 1,100km between the city of Conchas on the Tietê, and São Simão on the Paranaíba, and then on to Itaipu, adding up 2,400km of navigable water. Transport by water offers a cheaper alternative to road haulage and these waterways carry over one million tons of grain per year. There have been lively debates about the creation of a network of waterways linking four countries, including landlocked Bolivia and Paraguay, back via the Tietê to the continent's economic powerhouse of São Paulo. If the politicians co-operated then such a scheme might easily be achieved.

