

In conversation with Teresa Bracher:

“Do your research, please!”

Research served as the basis for Teresa Bracher and her family’s collaborative approach to philanthropy in the Brazilian Pantanal. Researchers had urged them to incorporate the local community in their activities – and their advice paid off in many different ways.

When I asked Teresa in an e-mail about the recent wildfires in the Pantanal, I could almost hear and feel her presence in her heavy-hearted response: they had a bad year and it was the third year of intense fires. But she and her team were about to begin restoration work. The devotion and genuine passion that Teresa puts into these activities are rare and remarkable.

When I met her a few months earlier, she had told me about her passion for nature. She is a philanthropist and founder of Acaia Pantanal, a socio-educational program that brings together efforts for the development of the riverside population of the Pantanal region in South America. As a schoolgirl in São Paulo, Bracher spent a lot of time in the countryside on a farm with her family. She enjoyed the beauty of nature and the freedom of playing out of doors with the neighbor’s kids. But soon, she also realized the downsides of rural life. The remoteness, the dangers that nature is exposed to when there are no laws to protect it, as well as the challenges faced by the local population – all of this left a deep impression on her. Among many other things, Bracher realized that the children she was playing with on the farms were very different from her. “The quality of education they got in their rural school was by far not what I received in my school in São Paulo,” says Teresa, “I knew we would have very different opportunities in life.”

A broader perspective needed

Teresa and her husband decided in 2005 to buy four farms in the Brazilian Pantanal, the world’s largest tropical wetland area and largest flooded grasslands. They are situated in the neighboring area of a UNESCO-protected region. “I had to convince my husband to buy the land in the Pantanal in the first place. But very quickly, we realized that it was not only the land we needed to protect, but the lagoon too.” What was a simple project at first sight – conserving a piece of land by owning it – became a big challenge.

Bracher and her husband asked themselves what “protection” really meant to them. What was their goal? Protecting the land so no harm could be done to it? Would this be sustainable?



What needed to be done in the long term? “Suddenly, I had the feeling that this project was much more than I could handle,” says Bracher. “I didn’t even know where to start. The people of the surrounding farms were very unfortunate. It was a land with no law and no public services.” Looking for solutions, Bracher decided to hire a researcher to study the landscape, the environment and the people with the goal of finding the best way to help the community and preserve the land.

Investing in a thorough analysis is worthwhile

Together, they interviewed about 100 people in 14 months. “I quickly understood that developing a solid and trustworthy relationship with the community was extremely important. Listening and opening your mind and heart to the needs of the people was very fulfilling,” says Bracher. Listening to the wisdom, concerns and desires of the local population was key to developing the area and protecting it effectively.”

The interviews also helped them realize that the people were in desperate need of a solid education for their children in order to improve their chances in life, and become less dependent on cheap, destructive forms of agriculture, or even illegal activities. “So the decision was taken: we will build a school.” And by building a school, she helped to build a future for the people.

Adapt and course-correct

Yet according to Bracher, “along our way, we had to adapt and re-adapt our plans to the realities we were faced with many times.” The biggest challenge was that a school in such a remote place is not very attractive for teachers in the long term. Bracher and her team made the best of the situation: they decided to become a “school for teachers”, where teachers teach temporarily, receive training and leave the school as more equipped, skilled and experienced educators than before. Another challenge is working with the government. The school has been a public-private partnership since the beginning, with 90% of its costs being covered through fundraising and 10% covered by the government. In recent years, however, the school has not received any government funding due to the pandemic.

Despite all the obstacles, the school is a success story. As a boarding school that hosts 60 children, it has become a family, an anchor and the heart of the community for the students, their families and for Bracher.

When asked about the one piece of advice she would give to other philanthropists, Bracher replies: "Do your research, please!

It is so important as a first step. And all the money you put in your research will pay back double and triple." In Teresa's case, the research showed her that the most successful approach is not always the most straightforward. "You have to make sure the community understands you are not doing something to them, to their land and property, but you are doing it with them."

Article by: Nina Hoas, Head of LGT Philanthropy Advisory
Photo: generously provided by Teresa Bracher

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