

Atlantic Forest, Brazil

by Fernando Lessa

For as long as I can remember, I have been more interested in the unknown rather than boring beauty. As a result I was more attracted to swim in a beautiful river than from a beach.

Why?

Maybe is more about the unknown or for the feeling of doing something unique? Or maybe because it's so complex and rich that I couldn't describe it in words..

Considered one of the five hotspots of the world, the Atlantic Forest now covers only 8% of its original area. Spread all over the Brazilian coast, from the beach to almost 200km inland, this stunning biome still keep its secrets and beauty. And there are few people that have had the chance to see it from this angle - the underwater view of an ecosystem that is totally water dependent, and have never been explored.

Having decided to do it, about three months ago I put my hands to work: Shoot the most interesting and beautiful places of the Atlantic Forest.

As a personal project, without

any funding, I'm doing it step by step. There are still many places to visit, so at the moment I'm looking for diveup to around 200km from my home.

The Atlantic Forest has a very rich ichthiofauna, with high levels of endemecity. The water is also home to, as well as fish, many species of shrimps and small lobsters, crabs, frogs, snakes, turtles, jaguars...the whole Forest depends on its close relationship with the water.

Diving in rivers and being alone, demands some preparation and planning. Usually there are three kinds of dive:

Shallow river with rocky bottom: These are nice rivers to shoot for small and colourful catfishes and crustaceans. In the pools one can find other fish like Hoplias sp, Gymnotidae

Good morning Juruená! Ready for another day of jungle diving

Brazil is place of an insane variety of catfishes, this is being a Loricaridae. They are very shy and usually hide from the diver. Lots of patience is need. F90 1/250 ISO 400 Ikelite housing + Macro port + Nikon D800 + Sigma 105mm f2.8 + SB105.





Hollandichthys sp tends to stay more in the darker areas of the pools. They usually swin in small groups and are very territorialist.. Ikelite housing + Macro port +Nikon D800 + Sigma 105mm f2.8 + SB105.. F5.0 1/250 ISO 400

sp, Cichlids and many more. Bear in mind that these places are very original and you can easily find new species that haven't been described by science.

Medium deep pools, isolated by waterfalls:

These are the most interesting. Usually home to big schools of Characidae, and with incredible scenery. You can do some splits, taking the falls, with really cool

results. If you manage to bring tanks, some pools can be deep as four to five meters and on the bottom one can find interesting crustaceans and other predators. Here we have a freshwater shrimp, originally from Indonesia, that can grow up to 35cm.

Clean mangrove diving:

When the rivers get close to the sea you find more mud and obstacles like trees and big rocks. The tides affect these areas and you need to



This are the friendly Coridoras (Coridora sp). They walk around in small schools, looking for small creatures in the botton. Ikelite housing + Macro port +Nikon D800 + sigma 105mm f2.8 + Sb105.. f9.0 1/250 ISO 400

know what state it is at. Here, you can have a mix of the sea and river fauna, so you can find cichlids mixed with juvenile jacks. As you go up river and farther from the ocean, they became more transparent and the fauna gets more "river like".

Free diving covers 90% of the situations, and the photo setup is my trusty D800 Ikelite housing, 2 Nikon SB105 being one connected to the flash arm, and the other hand

held. Sometimes, lighting is difficult and being able to move one flash, independently, is very useful.

Everything must fit and be well protected in my old 42l backpack for the hikes, with the diving gear and my 5mm suit and weights. When in more inaccessible places, you need to bring food, water, lights and patience, because the mosquitoes are very hungry inside the forest!

This time I've chosen two rivers:



Poeciliidae are very common and can be a nice subject for macro training. Ikelite housing + Macro port + Nikon D800 + sigma 105mm f2.8 + Sb105. f2.8 1/250 ISO 50



You can find mud banks covered with some amazing emerald green color. They are full of shrimps. Ikelite housing + Macro port + Nikon D800 + sigma 105mm f2.8 + Sb105. f2.8 1/250 ISO 50



Gobies are very common in the area, Awaous sp. They are very friendly and usually let you take lots of shots. Ikelite housing + Macro port + Nikon D800 + sigma 105mm f2.8 + Sb105. f10 1/160 ISO 20

Jaguareguava and Quilombo. Both are located close to the city of Santos, less than 20km from the biggest ports in South America. They are part of Serra do Mar National Park, but can be easily reached by car from outside the park.

Jaguareguava, means in the Tupi language, “where the Jaguar drinks water”. It is an easy option for your first jungle diving. You can begin in a very clean mangrove area and finish around big schools of charadics in some pools, after an amazing waterfall. Or with a short walk, you can reach more waterfalls and pools. I usually use an old canoe, where I can leave my equipment, and bring my

boots, in case any walking is needed.

Quilombo was more obscure. I saw some notes on a scientific paper, but didn’t really know what to expect. A friend sent me the coordinates and that was it.

What I’ve found is a very preserved river and clean water. Good for macro and with lots opportunities to find rare fish. In 6 hours diving I could count more than 10 types of catfish (Loricaridae) and four different shrimps plus other fish.

All the fauna of this river depends on the water as due to their small size, they are very dependent on the rain. During the summer rains, some of them can double their size in minutes. The results are very unique animals, adapted to this crazy environment. Look close to find colorful details and interesting behaviors! Schools of White mullets, Snooks, mini jacks and pupperfishes are easily found.

The plan of that day was to be

in the river around 10am and finish the day with a night dive, at around 9pm.

I started with a Sigma fisheye 15mm f2.8, trying to use the sunlight, but the tide was too intense and the water wasn’t clean enough. So I switched to macro for the last of the daylight. I enjoyed every minute learning how the gobies behave,



Nightdiving at Jaguareguava River. Ikelite D800 + plus dome. D800 Nikon camera+ Sigma 15mm f2.8 fisheye + tripod. The background light comes from a flashlight. F 3.5 1/30 ISO 800.

shooting shrimps and looking for a particular fish that I've seen here ages ago. A kind of Poecilidae with an yellow anal fin.

To finish, a quick night session. With the help of my wife, I manage to work on some underwater landscapes, shooting some wide angle with a tripod a flash and some flashlight (my wife would lightpaint the surface from topside). The tide was very strong, and besides enjoying the time, I called it a day after less than an hour.

When I woke up, the next day, I

could hear the rain on my tent. With no expectations, I packed and went to see if I could find Quilombo river and see how the water was down there.

The access was easy and after an hour I could see the river. It was a gray and rainy day, perfect for staying in bed, but it ended up being perfect for shooting: There was no one around, no sounds, just you and the river. The grey day also invited some more night animals to be around and there were interesting creatures everywhere.



A bromelia, Bromeliaceae, shot during a quick night dive. Ikelite housing wide port + Nikon D800 + sigma 15mm f2.8 + 1 Sb105. F4.5 1/40 ISO 800

The tip is to stay focused on small areas, until you really start seeing things moving. Life in this place are usually very camouflaged. Due to the rain, the water wasn't 100%, so I stuck to macro.

I could shoot schools of different species of Corydora, Characids and even a rare South American lungfish (sorry, no good pictures of this guy, yet.), which is a rare find.

There may not be the variety of life that you would find on dreamy pacific reefs, but unique creatures for

sure.

For the future I'm planning a return to Quilombo, for some night-diving. and also an attempt to another kind of Atlantic river: altitude rivers, up on 700m. These rivers are even more complex, with the average temperature around 12 °C (56°F), beautiful underwater gardens and with some of the most unknown ecosystems of the Atlantic Forest.

If you have knowledge in the field of tropical forest and river ecology in South America and would like to contribute, I would be very grateful.

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