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beginning, researchers planted degraded areas with species that were thriving in healthy forest, but with little success. “We did not know the ecological succession,” says Garcia Rodrigues. In recent years he and colleagues have identified pioneer plants able to grow in degraded areas and pave the way for other, more demanding plants. Before planting an area, they use drones to assess its condition, then fine-tune their restoration plan.

In the next rainy season they plan to plant almost 50,000 seedlings of 26 different species, aiming to restore 100 hectares of the streamside woodland the Spix’s calls home, plus another 100 hectares of caatinga. Although some of the plants will provide food for the Spix’s macaws within a year, it will take decades before the birds or their descendants might nest in the trees being planted now.

The project will also involve the caatinga’s human inhabitants. For many generations, goats were their only source of protein, says Claudia Martins, a researcher who works with Garcia Rodrigues. “Many people here don’t have bank accounts. If they have an emergency, they sell a goat.” Getting rid of these animals is not realistic, at least in the short term. So the ecologists are careful to select plants that are not attractive to goats and fence off newly planted areas to give seedlings a head start against the goats. “We have to learn to manage goats and acknowledge people’s livelihoods and traditions if we want to have success in restoration,” Martins says.

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