



Rainforest Tribes

A Garden of Eden?

Rainforests are very rich in natural resources, but they are also very fragile. For this reason, rainforest peoples have become instinctive conservationists. For them, conservation is literally a way of life. If they were to take too much food in one year, the forest would not be able to produce enough new food for them to be able to survive in the next year. Many rainforest tribes gather their food from small garden plots, which are shifted every few years. This method is less productive than western agriculture, but is also much less harmful to the rainforest environment. As they cannot produce food in large quantities, most tribes are forced to limit their numbers so their gardens and the products of hunting expeditions are able to feed them, and all tribes have a great respect for their forest and for the animals and plants they share it with.



The rainforest lifestyle may sound like a kind of paradise, a Garden of Eden for the lucky few who live there. It certainly has its advantages. There is little stress, little mental illness and little high blood pressure among rainforest dwellers. Physical fitness is generally good, and few people need to work for more than four hours a day to provide themselves and their families with adequate food and other necessities. However, life is far from perfect. One in every two children born in the rainforest dies before their second birthday, and if they make it to forty years of age they are considered tribal elders. Most rain forest dwellers who make it through childhood tend to die from a disease trivial to western medicine.

Sacrifice for Survival



Competition for good hunting grounds is fierce, and there is often warfare between neighbouring groups when disputes over territorial rights break out. New-born babies are often killed by their mothers in order to prevent a group from growing too large to be supported by its territory.

This is a major problem, as territories can be very large indeed.. It has been estimated that a group of eighty-four people needs a minimum territory of 640 square kilometres in order to be fully self-sufficient. Female babies are killed more often than males. There are a number of reasons for this: men are the hunters, so by having more males a group is able to send out more hunters in order to produce more food; men are also warriors, so the more adult males there are in a group, the better protected against enemies it will be; as men are warriors, many of them are killed in battles with neighbouring groups; by limiting the number of women in a group, the group's ability to reproduce is naturally restricted. Although these measures may seem harsh to us, they are perfectly logical and an essential feature of life in the rain forest. A group which becomes too large will starve, so selective killing of infants ensures the group's survival.

Endangered Species



This way of life has gone on uninterrupted for centuries, but is now under threat because of the invasion of the rain forest by outsiders - logging companies, mining operations and ranchers looking to make a quick profit by exploiting the natural resources to be found in the rain forests around the world. When you think of endangered species, you tend to think of animals or plants.

It would be fair however to describe rainforest peoples as endangered species. Each tribe is unique, has its own culture, mythology, religious beliefs, art and ritual. There may be a great deal we can learn from them.

We know already that there are a vast number of as yet undiscovered plants and animals in the rain forest. Tribal medicine men may hold in their heads the key to curing many of the world's as yet incurable diseases by using undocumented chemical compounds found in species of rain forest plants.

At the moment, despite the efforts of pressure groups, little concern is being shown either for the welfare of the rain forest or of its inhabitants - animal or vegetable - by the governments in control of the vast, but shrinking, areas of rain forest still in existence.

Even more frustrating is the knowledge that rain forest soil is very poor for growing crops and turns to virtual desert within five years of losing its protective canopy of trees. Governments know this, yet still allow logging and ranching to continue on a huge scale. It is true that in the short term, huge amounts of money can be made from exploiting the rain forest in this way. But in the longer term, and here I mean no more than ten to fifteen years, there will simply be vast areas of desert where once there was rain forest.

But I digress. Let us turn now to the fortunes of possibly the most famous of all the tribes of the rainforest, the Yanomami Indians of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela. I hope that by looking at this one example in detail it will be possible to examine the problems which face rainforest peoples all over the world.

Protected Species

As Amazonian Indian tribes go, the Yanomami have been lucky. Their traditional homelands were in the mountainous highlands of Brazil and Venezuela, away from the big rivers and relatively inaccessible. For this reason they were spared the ravaging effects of the previously unknown diseases brought by the Spanish conquistadors to South America during the seventeenth century, which wiped out many of the riverine tribes completely. Since then their territories have expanded into the lower valleys, but despite this, until recent times the only contact the Yanomami have had with whites had been through the occasional visits of scientists or missionaries.

In 1985, however, a gold-rush on Yanomami lands in Brazil led to the influx of tens of thousands of miners and prospectors, overwhelming the small populations of local people. So far the Yanomami have been able to maintain their traditional customs, despite outside influences. After world-wide protest at the harsh treatment of the Yanomami, the Brazilian government was forced to grant the Yanomami 94,000 square kilometres of territory, an area larger than Scotland, in 1991. As has been noted above, even small groups need very large areas of territory in order to provide for themselves. The Yanomami know that if their population density increases, they will start to overuse their resources. Villages tend to fragment naturally through political rivalry and discontent as they become larger. This means that the average village population

is kept down to between 50 and 70.

Despite having the supposed protection of the Brazilian government, garimpeiros - illegal gold miners - continue to prospect on Yanomami lands. They have brought with them diseases that are either lethal or very difficult to control among the Yanomami. In 1991, a survey showed that half of all Brazil's Yanomami suffered from malaria, a disease previously unknown to them. Other diseases like tuberculosis and hepatitis are killing large numbers of Indians, and the Brazilian national health service is not providing medicines in sufficient quantity to control the problem. It has also been found that people living downstream from the gold mines have unacceptably high levels of mercury in their bodies.

And in Venezuela



In Venezuela the Yanomami live in a biosphere reserve which is 83,000 square kilometres in area. The biosphere reserve was set up not only to protect the 11,000 or so Yanomami who live there, sharing the territory with the Yekuana tribe, but also to protect the rich rainforests of the region.

For the Venezuelan Yanomami, it would seem that their biggest problem is the army, which has been moved into their lands in order to protect them from the Brazilian garimpeiros (see above). The morale of the officers and men alike is poor, and they take out their frustration on the Yanomami, through abuse, including rape.

Further problems are caused by the frequent "scientific" expeditions into their lands. The Yanomami say that

they learn nothing from the expeditions and that they do not believe that some of the visitors are scientists anyway. Eco-tourists are becoming more common intruders on rainforest people's lands.

They should be reminded that in looking for that "unique jungle experience" they may bring with them diseases new to the tribes they encounter while having their "experience". It should be remembered that medical care for the Yanomami seems to be as inadequate in Venezuela as it is in Brazil.

Left: The unique jungle experience.

Rainforest Peoples - The Future

In the case of the Yanomami, there is at least some cause for optimism. They now live on reserves approved by governments and seem to be maintaining their traditions. Clearly there is a need for better health care and for more sympathetic policing of their lands by the military. They are perhaps the most famous of all rain forest tribes, and are therefore protected to some extent by public opinion. There would be world-wide outcry if Yanomami lands were threatened by development or mining again.

But how many other tribes are struggling for survival in the rainforests of the world? How many people have heard of the Kayapo, the Yekuana, the Iban, the Mehinacu or the Xikru? How much popular support could be rallied in their defence?

Clearly, rain forest tribes throughout the world are in need of protection. This protection should be granted as soon as possible by the governments of their nation states, but is bound to take time. Most rain forest tribes live in poor countries. The forests are rich in natural resources and can make huge sums of money for a few years, thus making the countries involved richer. But after those few years all that remains is desert. Most former rain forest which has been exploited for other purposes will either take many years to recover, or will never recover at all. The only way to stop the destruction of the rain forests, of the animals and plants, and of the tribes which live in them is through greater public awareness of the problems we are creating for ourselves. By this I mean a world-wide realization of the importance of the rain forest and its inhabitants, and of the need for proper protection against its permanent destruction. The possibility of imposing trade sanctions upon countries which continue to destroy their rain forests is at time of writing a subject of debate at a meeting of worldwide conservation groups. Perhaps this is a hopeful sign for the future of the rain forest...

Useful Reading

1. The Law of the Mother

Elizabeth Kemf (Ed), Sierra Club Books (1993).

- Details of the problems facing tribal peoples all over the world, including the Yanomami.

2. The Last Rainforests

Dr Mark Collins (Ed), Guild Publishing (1990).

- This is a general reference book about rain forests, which also has some information on tribes living in them.

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