




## 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 rainforest dwellers who make it through childhood tend to die from a disease trivial to western medicine.

It is estimated that the Amazon rainforest supported about six million tribal people before 1500AD. By 2000, there were less than 250,000 of them left. Over 90 tribes are thought to have disappeared from the Amazon alone during the 20th Century. Many were wiped out when western settlers brought diseases they had never encountered before - like measles - which wiped out thousands of tribespeople.

### A Battle for Survival



Competition for good hunting grounds is fierce, and warfare between neighbouring groups can break out

when there are disputes over territorial rights.

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.

## **Endangered Species**



Their way of life has gone on uninterrupted for centuries, but is now under threat because of the invasion of the rainforest 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 language, 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 rainforest 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 rainforest soil is very poor for growing crops and can turn to virtual desert within five years of losing its protective canopy of trees and the anchoring effects of tree roots, with the topsoil washed away in the rains.

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 - perhaps in as little as ten to fifteen years -there will simply be vast areas of desert where once there was rain forest.

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. 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.

### **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 rainforest 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 Kaiapo, the Yekuana, the Iban, the Mehinacu or the Xikru? How much popular support could be rallied in their defence? As events of February 2011 have shown, actually quite a lot can be done.

The massive Belo Monte hydroelectric power scheme which was planned for the Xingu River of Brazil was blocked by a judge's decision after protests by Kaiapo Indians and the delivery of a petition containing no less than 600,000 signatures of people who opposed the scheme, which would have flooded at least 500 square kilometres of rainforest and displaced some 50,000 people living in the forests.

What is undoubtedly true is that rainforest 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 rainforest 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 rainforests, 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 rainforest and its inhabitants, and of the need for proper protection against its permanent destruction.

There is now increasing global concern about climate change and about how destruction of the rainforest is likely to accelerate it. This is leading to the world's governments taking a stronger interest in protecting rainforested areas for the future. With financial assistance from the developed countries of the world, there is the potential for many areas of rainforest - and the people who live in them - to be saved for the future.

The way of life of the forest peoples is as fragile as the forests they live in. Most prefer to be left alone to continue living as they always have done, in harmony with their surroundings. Their way of life could teach us a great deal.

### **Further information on rainforest tribes from Survival International**

- the movement for tribal peoples

[www.survivalinternational.org](http://www.survivalinternational.org)

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