

CHANGING PLANET



Uncontacted Indians of Acre State, Brazil

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'In the forest, we see with our ears,' says José Carlos Meirelles, an expert on Brazil's last uncontacted tribes.

During his recent expeditions into the remote rainforest of Acre state, contacted Indians told him that uncontacted Indians imitate different animals to express emotions: wild pig when they are scared, macucau bird to let people know they are near, jaguar when they are angry.

Acre state is home to some of the last uncontacted tribes in the world: It is thought that at least 600 people, belonging to at least four different groups, live deep within its tropical rainforest. Survival International, the global movement for tribal peoples' rights, defines uncontacted tribes as peoples who have no peaceful contact with anyone in the mainstream or dominant society. They are extremely susceptible to diseases transmitted by outsiders such as measles and the common cold.

The existence of uncontacted tribes has been denied by many with vested interests over the years, despite the vast amount of evidence that has been collected. One official in Peru likened them to Scotland's Loch Ness monster. In 2007, Alan Garcia, the then President of Peru, declared that the isolated Mashco-Piro were *'created by environmentalists'* opposed to oil exploration.

That uncontacted tribes exist in the 21st century may be astonishing, but it is irrefutably true. Until recently, however, little was known about the daily lives of uncontacted tribes in Acre state. Experts were aware that they moved across the rainforest at different times of the year. It was also widely accepted that the decision to remain isolated was a strategy for survival, born of previous or current disastrous encounters with

invaders. Many of the uncontacted Indians in Acre state are probably the descendants of the few survivors of the rubber boom that wiped out 90% of the Indian population in a horrific wave of enslavement, disease and massacres.

Reasons to Stay on the Run

It is thought that these traumas are still alive in their collective memory, so staying uncontacted, sometimes on the run, makes common sense – it is simply the best way to stay alive. *‘When uncontacted tribes choose to remain isolated, they will have very good reasons to do so,’* says Fiona Watson, Director of Field Research at Survival. From speaking with recently contacted tribal peoples, information has been gleaned about what they know of the outside world. *‘We have always seen airplanes, but we did not know that it was something useful of the conjñone (white people),’* said Parojnai, an Ayoreo Indian from Paraguay, after he was contacted. *‘When we saw these big planes with this white smoke behind, we thought they were stars.’* Little else was known about them.

However four years ago, in 2010, an astonishing photograph was released by FUNAI. It was an image of an uncontacted community in Acre state, together with what was thought to be the first-ever film footage of the community. Taken from an aeroplane, it showed an Indian man and several children standing in a clearing at the headwaters of the Envira River. He was staring up at the ‘plane, with a long wooden arrow in one hand, his body painted red with crushed seeds of the annatto shrub. Survival International published the images: Proof of their existence would help protect their lives.

The photographs produced a global wave of support for uncontacted tribal peoples far greater than anything Survival has ever known before. Within two days of publication, Peru's Foreign Ministry announced that Peru would work with Brazilian authorities to stop loggers entering isolated Indians' territory along the countries' joint border. It was testament to the view of José Carlos Meirelles, that *'one image of them has more impact than a thousand reports.'*

Increase of Uncontacted Indians in Acre

More than three years after the images were published, additional information has been revealed by Meirelles about the uncontacted communities of western Amazonia. His research, gathered during long expeditions in the rainforest, has revealed a 'significant increase' in the number of uncontacted Indians in Acre state. On the surface this appears like positive news. But the reasons for this growth are, in part, sinister: many of the uncontacted Indians may have walked long distances – some up to 500 kms – to flee from the logging that has been devastating the Peruvian rainforest. The consequences of this increase in the number of people in the region are equally worrying. *'The displacement of Indians from Peru means that part of the land the uncontacted Indians now occupy is outside indigenous territory,'* says Fiona Watson, *'which means that the uncontacted are vulnerable to conflict with non-Indians.'* As they are encroaching on land of Brazil's uncontacted peoples, they will also be competing for resources and tensions will run high.

Expeditions and Evidence

Meirelles's expedition team – which comprised Indians, FUNAI members and top anthropologists – ventured in to an extremely remote corner of Acre state called the headwaters of the Envira River, which Meirelles describes as the start of *'the wrinkling of the Andes mountain range.'* A tributary of the Juruá river, it is a beautiful region of creeks and waterfalls; a thousand smaller streams run between one section of high land and another. It is also an area of extraordinary biodiversity: Tapir, deer, wild pig, puma, spotted jaguar and the endangered bearded saki monkey share their homeland with the uncontacted tribes. There are thousands of bugs. *'On every trip I see an invertebrate I've never seen before,'* says Meirelles, adding that some are edible.

Meirelle's team discovered footprints, temporary camps, shelters, food remains, baskets, arrows, animal bones, tortoise shells, and the remains of fires and gardens planted with manioc, banana plants and papaya: The tell-tale signs of uncontacted peoples. Sightings made by already contacted Indians in the area have also risen sharply; tribe members have heard uncontacted Indians imitating birds and monkeys deep within the rainforest. There has also been an increase in raids on rubber-tappers' homes.

Meirelles's method is to track uncontacted Indians for days, *'until we know they are close. Then we turn back,'* he says. *'Arrows hurt.'* Survival has long warned about the dangers of contact with uncontacted groups. Not only is there the risk of violence, but disease can quickly kill entire populations following contact. Additionally, when uncontacted groups from different territories meet another tribe, conflict can occur.

En route, the team finds remains of food the uncontacted Indians have eaten – fish, banana skins, manioc and peanut shells. Human footprints are, of course, a giveaway. *'It's easy to tell the difference between men's and women's footprints,'* Meirelles says. *'Children are a little more difficult. Boys have longer, tougher feet,*

whereas girls' feet are more delicate.'

The Flight From Peru

The teams have found that the increase of uncontacted tribes in the Envira region has occurred within the 'Humaita' and 'Xinane' - whose names denote the eponymous rivers of their homelands - and the 'Mascho-Piro' tribe.

The 'Xinane' may have fled from the Murunahua reserve in Peru, where illegal loggers and coca growers are invading their land. They have raided FUNAI's field post for corn seeds and banana plant saplings, which probably indicates that they left their land in Peru in a rush. It is also thought that the uncontacted Indians who approached the contacted Ashaninka community of Simpatia in Brazil during the second week of June 2014 were 'Xinane' Indians. They came very close to the Ashaninka, from whose village they took pots, pans and clothes.

The 'Humaita' are horticulturalists who grow manioc, banana, and corn and are known by other Indians as *'the Embira people'*, for the waistbands they make from Embira tree fibre. They are thought to have walked nearly 100kms from their villages in Peru. But it is the Mashco-Piro uncontacted Indians who are thought to have walked the furthest in order to flee from the destruction of their lands and the potential demise of their people: it is 500 kms from the headwaters of the Madeira river in Peru.

The Last of his Tribe

There are many other uncontacted tribes in Brazil. As a result of aerial and land surveys, the Brazilian government has so far identified 77 uncontacted peoples. One tribe in Rondônia state has only one lone man; known as 'the Last of his Tribe', he resists all attempts at contact. Others, like the Kawahiva tribe, have only a few dozen people remaining. It is believed they have stopped having children because they are constantly fleeing loggers and other intruders. The uncontacted Awá, who are the Earth's most threatened tribe, hunt monkey and other game at night, in order to remain hidden.

All are extremely vulnerable to diseases transmitted by outsiders, as they have not developed immunity to viruses such as influenza, measles and chicken pox that most other societies have been exposed to for hundreds of years. And **all** have a right to their lands, under international and national law.

The fact that they remain isolated does not mean that they remain 'undiscovered' or 'unchanged'. *'Most are already known of and, however isolated, all constantly adapt to their changing circumstances,'* says Stephen Corry. Equally, they are not 'backward' for their lack of 'industrialised' technology, material goods or formal education.

On the contrary, tribal peoples possess vast, unique repositories of knowledge of their eco-systems, and usually are their best conservationists. There is evidence to prove it: it is no coincidence that 80% of the world's biologically richest places are the territories of tribal communities who have lived there for millennia. Indigenous territories cover five times as much of the Amazon basin as other protected areas and are the most important barrier to deforestation in the region. Meirelles agrees. *'The uncontacted tribes have proved they know how to live in a sustainable way,'* he says. *'They serve this planet without even knowing it. I think we're missing an opportunity to learn from them.'*

Looming Dangers for Acre's Uncontacted Indians

For the uncontacted communities of the Envira River, there are serious dangers looming. In 2011 drug smugglers and illegal loggers overran a FUNAI post that had been monitoring their territory. Brazil's Congress is debating a series of controversial bills and constitutional amendments which would drastically weaken indigenous peoples' control over their lands. They are being pushed forward by Brazil's powerful rural lobby group that includes politicians who own ranches on indigenous land.

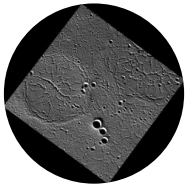
One thing is certain: their future depends on the protection of their lands, which gives them a chance to decide for themselves how much interaction they want with others. If this happens, they will thrive. Stephen Corry says it depends on the western world. *'The disappearance of the world's remaining uncontacted tribes lies in our hands, and is one of the greatest humanitarian challenges of the century,'* he says.

The world's collective conscience has shown itself to be strong in the number of supporters for uncontacted peoples. Since the aerial images were published in 2011, 135,000 people have signed the petition on Survival's website in support of uncontacted tribes in Brazil. This speaks volumes about the general recognition of tribal peoples' rights to live in the way that they choose, and for human diversity. *'The world needs human diversity just as much as it needs bio-diversity,'* says Stephen Corry. *'We can't afford to lose unique, vibrant societies.'*



MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including *Portrait of England* (Think Publishing, 2006) and *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.



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Prodria enviarme el link donde Meirelles hace un reportaje de uncontacted people. Dura como 50 minutes. Lo pude ver pero ya no encuentro el link otra vez. Gracias

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