

Pressures of development on indigenous peoples

by Patrick Cunningham, Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust



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Looking out from the boundary of the Xingu Indigenous Park at the neighbouring farmland, Mato Grosso State.

Many areas of the world which were previously protected for their environmental, ecological or cultural value are today under renewed and intense pressure. Mainstream culture's insatiable hunger for technology combines with the need to feed its growing population, threatening parts of the world whose longer-term value to humanity had previously been recognised and respected. Qualities, such as the ability of forests to regulate local and global climate and to mitigate the effects of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, are re-cast as barriers to development. Less tangible qualities to do with spirituality, cultural values and the protection of

vulnerable indigenous peoples and their traditional ways of life are often simply ignored.

Indigenous peoples across the world, from Australian aborigines to Kalahari bushmen, from Alaskan Inupiat to Brazil's rainforest tribes, are under threat from the push to extract minerals, pump petroleum, dam rivers for hydro power, flatten forests and raze native vegetation for industrial agriculture. These threats are intensifying because now they are driven by the powerful mega corporations which have come to dominate.

For a small charitable trust like

Tribes Alive, the effects can be daunting. Abrupt and massive change threatens to sweep away carefully crafted programmes developed in conjunction with tribal communities. The corporations and consortia involved in mega projects, often with the support of governments, bring the promise of prosperity and better services but deliver irreversible cultural dislocation and strife. No amount of money can compensate a community for the loss of its ability to feed, house, equip, cure and amuse itself without the need for money, in perpetuity. But that irreversible loss is the real-world consequence of many development projects.

Imagine the change: one day a remote, peaceful and quiet community living in a world of trees, bubbling rivers and familiar animals; a few years later their world is transformed as they try to adapt to the noise and speed of integration into the mainstream. Villages of thatched houses, built using only the biodegradable materials found in the forest, are replaced by 'modern' shacks of brick, tin and concrete. The sounds of the forest are buried under a cacophony of machinery, vehicles and music from radio stations. Their independence, once taken away, is lost forever, leaving them on the lowest rungs of mainstream culture, stripped of their identity and of the traditional source of the materials to sustain life: the forests they have occupied for many millennia. And they are forced into an alien dependence on money for their daily sustenance.

But there is hope. Tribes Alive strives to protect both the physical and the cultural integrity of the tribes we work with. We help them to manage the process of adapting to new situations and ways of life. Our objective is to create a structure to allow the communities to interact with the commercial world in a way which respects their traditional communitarian social structures, drawing on the principles of fair trade to channel income generated from carefully-selected products into the community as a whole, while ensuring that the individuals involved in production receive a realistic financial recognition of their roles. We have communities who supply babassu nut oil to Ila-Spa, a small manufacturer of luxury toiletries and cosmetics, and the fashion chain Sahara has launched its Xingu range which uses indigenous designs from the Kayapo tribe, for which they pay a royalty.

These sources of income are vital because the tribes today make use of many manufactured items, like torches, knives, aluminium pots,



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Kayapo peoples are now being paid a royalty for their designs.

short-wave radios and bicycles. These improve their quality of life, but do not affect the structure of their daily activities. They still hunt, fish and grow mixed crops on small plots of land for daily sustenance, and they maintain their traditional beliefs and ceremonial customs.

These are living, developing cultures and communities, and in time they may choose to align themselves more with the mainstream. But our experience is that neither are they ready nor do they wish to be assimilated. They defend their traditions and practices and have no desire to replace their traditionally-built villages with brick and tin shanties.

There is no simple answer. There is no universal solution. Each community, each ethnic group, each geographical area has its own needs, problems and solutions. We respect their right to self-determination, which is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We also respect their right to be different, both culturally and socially, but to be accepted as equal, and free from discrimination.

Rainforest Concern has been one of our most consistent and dependable supporters. Because we are a small

organisation, we are able to respond to urgent requests for small-scale assistance very quickly, and we have found Rainforest Concern similarly flexible. This means that we are able to address needs which larger organisations, with an administration system which requires a pre-planned application-consideration-grant-monitoring process, cannot. We can do this because we have a direct and continuous personal connection to, and understanding of, the organisations and communities we work with. This enables us to monitor the use of our funds in an informal but rigorous way, and we are very grateful to Rainforest Concern for its confidence in us, and its ongoing support.

The indigenous people we work with, simply by existing in areas of importance to the climate, to biodiversity and to weather patterns, provide the world with services for which they neither seek nor receive payment. It is our responsibility to support them to continue to live on their land – which they have occupied for millennia – and to maintain their spiritual and practical bonds with the forests. It is our ethical and moral responsibility. But it is also in our own interests, for by protecting the forests they protect the entire planet.