

A Tribe Is Discovered

It's like a scene from a novel—but this time it's for real. Photographed from a passing airplane, colorful figures can be seen in a clearing in the Amazonian rainforest. Two men with bows and arrows stand ready to fire at the overhead threat. They are painted bright orange with paint made from an Amazonian tree. Just feet behind them, a figure painted black also stares up into the sky. Beyond them, the entire village is coming to life. Other tribesmen emerge from traditional thatched longhouses and prepare to fight, while young children run for safety. As the small aircraft continues to circle above, images of the village are recorded and the tribe's existence is confirmed to the outside world.

The group lives in six huts in the Acre region of the Brazilian rainforest on the Brazil-Peru border and have had no known contact with the “civilized” world. The body language of the Acre tribe suggests that they have a way of life worth defending. From the images on the Internet last week, all of them—adults and children alike—look fit and healthy. They have none of the material possessions of the developed world, but they appear to be content without them.

“We did the overflight to show their houses, to show they are there, to show they exist,” said José Carlos dos Reis Meirelles Júnior, an uncontacted tribes expert who works for the Brazilian government's Indian affairs department. “This is very important because there are some who doubt their existence.”

However, since the pictures have been published and because more people are now aware of the village's existence, a debate has begun about new risks and dangers to the tribe. How long will it be before wealthy adventurers and tourists go in search of a unique Amazonian experience? How long will it be before illegal loggers attempt to clear them off their land to cut down valuable lumber? Their discovery poses a moral dilemma for the authorities. Should the Acre tribe be left alone to continue their contented lifestyle for as long as they can? Or should contact be forced by well-intentioned scientists to prepare the uncontacted tribe for its inevitable first encounter with the twenty-first century?

Dr. Nicole Bourque, a Glasgow University anthropologist who has studied Amazonian cultures, says that views are divided even among experts. “Some will say leave them untouched. Others, probably the majority, will say more contact is inevitable. So the best thing you can hope for is ‘managed contact,’ where you send an appropriate person to prepare the tribe for what might happen. At least then the first outsiders they meet are decent people.”

It is impossible to calculate how many tribes of uncontacted people survive in the world's jungles. The best guess of experts is that around 100 small groups remain, mostly in the Amazonian rainforest—an area the size of Western Europe. Other isolated groups are also believed to exist in remote areas of heavily forested islands, such as Papua New Guinea.

How many of these tribes are genuinely unaware of the modern world is also unknown. What is certain, though, is that contact almost always ends in disaster. A decade ago, “first contact” was made with the Murunahua (pronounced moor-uh-now-uh) group that was living in an area in the Peruvian jungle. About 100-strong, they were surviving well until illegal loggers came in search of mahogany, a highly valued wood. David Hill, a researcher for Survival International, a global charity that campaigns for the rights of threatened indigenous peoples, has seen the consequences. “They were forcibly contacted by illegal loggers, who shoot to kill. Since then, 50% of them have died. Some were shot, but most died from diseases that were introduced to them.” Simple viruses such as the flu, which Westerners have natural defenses against, can prove fatal to tribes that have always lived in isolation.

Last year, Hill traveled to Peru to interview the remaining members of the tribe. One survivor, Jorge, told him: “When the loggers made contact with us, we came out of the rainforest. That was when the disease began. Half of us died. My aunt died; my nephew died. Half of my people died.”

The group now lives in a more conventional village and has adopted Western-style clothing and a money-based economy. However, other Murunahua groups still exist and still live in traditional communities deep in the forest. They don’t seem to want to be found. “What has happened,” says Hill, “is they have moved even deeper into the forest.”

Hill is delighted that last week’s image of the Acre tribe made global headlines. “It puts pressure on governments to stop the logging,” he said. “I have no doubt that the aim of the flight was right. It was designed to discover where the uncontacted tribes are living, how many of them there are, and how they are living. If you don’t know where they are, then you can’t protect them as well.”

However, he firmly recommends leaving the Acre tribe on its own. “We would warn strongly against further contact,” Hill said, citing the proven threat of disease.

One practical way of protecting the tribes is to limit the activities of the loggers; the Brazilian government has already closed down 28 illegal sawmills in Acre state. Another is to deter curious tourists. Most people are discouraged by the difficulty of reaching an area like this. However, in places like the highlands of West Papua, travelers can already pay 8,000 dollars to be led into the jungles for “first contact experiences.”

Dr. Bourque is saddened by this. “You get the curiosity factor, and you want your picture taken with a tribesman so you can tell your friends at home or post it on your blog. People don’t think about the long-term impact on these communities.”

However, she believes that contact with friendly outsiders is preferable to conflict with possibly hostile commercial interests. She thinks the time may be close when uncontacted groups have to be gently brought into the modern age.

“It would be better if first contact came from the appropriate people with the right motives and the

right medical support, who could prepare them for the future and what might happen.”