



## Indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation

*A number of Amazonian groups face extinction as their space to live away from the modern world disappears*

Far from the eyes of the world, some sixty-four indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation in Amazonian Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and Bolivia – the Tagaeri, Huaorani, Taramenane, Corubo, Amamhuaca, Mascho, Kineri, Nanti, Nahua and Kugapakori, among others – are condemned to gradual extinction. These tribes remain mysterious, avoiding all contact with strangers and preferring the isolated existence they have maintained for centuries. What little is known about them has been gleaned from other indigenous groups and from chance encounters with developers and rights groups. But what is clear is that their numbers are rapidly dwindling: the Coruba now number only 40; and the number of Mascho speakers is estimated to be between 20 and 100. The Amamhuaca language, it is thought, is spoken only by 720 people: 500 in Peru and 220 in Brazil.

Attempts to learn more about these groups can prove fatal. The last known report of contact with the Tagaeri, the indigenous group with the strictest self-imposed isolation, was in July 1987, when two missionaries whose attempt to convince the tribe to allow oil extractors to enter their territory led to their deaths. The Tagaeri subsequently abandoned their homes and disappeared deeper into dense forests, demonstrating their rejection of co-existence with the modern world.

Gas and oil companies, loggers, miners and entrepreneurs are viewed by indigenous groups as “ghosts of death” for the toxic legacy they can leave behind and which can poison rivers and forests considered as a source of life for these communities. These indigenous groups have developed their own health care and food gathering systems, but which are fragile and easily threatened by damage to the ecosystems wherein they live. All too often contact with outsiders results in the transfer of disease, resulting in epidemics since the indigenous peoples have no immunities to what are common and treatable diseases elsewhere.

Governments around the world have increasingly acknowledged the rights of indigenous peoples. In part, this has been the result of a process of empowerment by such groups, who have pressed their demands on governments. In the case of groups living in isolation, preferring to avoid contact with government representatives and other communities, responding to their needs is far more difficult. The Brazilian Government was among the first to take steps to adopt a policy of creating territorial reserves for people living in voluntary isolation that are “no-go zones” to extractive industries and migrants. Colombia, Ecuador and Peru are also looking at similar action. The challenge facing the impoverished governments of the region is to balance the further exploitation of the riches of the Amazonian belt in the name of development, and the protection of these fragile indigenous groups, and the cultural heritage they represent.

For further information:

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