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The Yanomamö: A People in Search of a Future

This year marks the beginning of a worldwide campaign to establish a large, integrated, and well-protected land area for the Yanomamö Indians who are threatened by highway, mining, and colonization projects in the Amazon region of Brazil. The Yanomamö, who number more than 17,000 people and live in scores of isolated villages along the frontier between Venezuela and Brazil, form a special place in modern anthropology. For nearly two decades, anthropologists have been studying the unique customs and ecological adaptations of the Yanomamö tribe. Thousands of college students have read about the Yanomamö in anthropology courses; several documentary films about these people have appeared on national television in Europe, Japan, and the United States; anthropologists have intensely debated the determinants of Yanomamö warfare, marriage, and subsistence patterns. Yet, despite this scientific interest, it is surprising how little public attention has focused on the serious contact situation of the Yanomamö tribe.

The story of the Yanomamö has been repeated over and over again in the recent occupation of the Brazilian Amazon. In 1974, the Brazilian government began construction of the Northern Perimeter Highway, a road that forms part of the Trans-Amazon highway network and passes through the southern part of Yanomamö territory. Diseases carried by highway workers have already destroyed thirteen villages along the first 100 kilometers of the new road. Brazilian anthropologist Alcida Ramos, who

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was present at the time of the initial invasion by highway workers, witnessed Indians in a state of sickness, misery, and shock. The Indians refused to speak their language, their gardens had been uprooted by bulldozers, and they were wearing ragged clothing given to them by highway workers and infested with influenza, tuberculosis, measles, and other germs.

Similar conditions have been reported at the Catrimani mission station, only three kilometers from the new highway. For more than a decade, a group of Italian priests has been trying to prepare the Yanomamö at Catrimani for their eventual contacts with outsiders. The missionaries refused to intervene in the Indians' ceremonial and spiritual lives, but warned their chiefs against indiscriminate encounters with Brazilian settlers. When the highway teams arrived in 1975, neither the Indians nor the missionaries were prepared. Diseases, including tuberculosis and venereal infections, increased eight-fold in a period of fifteen months. A measles epidemic struck the Indians at Catrimani in 1977, killing eighty persons and creating havoc throughout the region.

To make matters worse, Brazilian geologists discovered large deposits of uranium and cassiterite (an ore used in the production of tin) in the Surucucus region of Yanomamö territory. This region contains seventy-four Yanomamö villages with a population of 4,500 people. Uncontrolled contacts between Indians and prospectors devastated the Yanomamö at Surucucus. In less than two years, illnesses killed more than half of the

Indians at a Protestant mission station. Armed conflicts also broke out between the Indians and the prospectors over scarce food resources.

The Brazilian Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform began a program in 1977 to settle colonists in the Yanomamö homeland. At the same time, the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) conducted its first aerial-photographic survey of the Yanomamö area. Based on the results of this survey, FUNAI declared that twenty-one Indian reserves would be created for the protection of the 8,400 Yanomamö who live in the Federal Territory of Roraima and the adjacent State of Amazonas. The Indian agency's own data show that more than 2,900 people living in fifty-eight villages are not included in the reserve proposal. Highway and settlement corridors are planned to run between almost all of these reserves and no provisions have been made for satisfying the demographic, ecological, and subsistence needs of the tribe.

Last June, a group of Brazilian citizens, who feared the implications of the FUNAI reserve proposal, submitted a counter-proposal to the Brazilian Minister of the Interior calling for the immediate creation of a 16 million acre Yanomamö Indian Park. An Indian park, unlike other reserve areas under Brazilian law, is established within the land already in the possession of the Indians. Within these parks, Indian freedom, customs, and traditions are respected. The natural ecology of these parks is supposed to be preserved, and the subdivision of land

should comply with ~~a~~ tribal rather than national property rules. The Yanomamö Park proposal, which is designed within these provisions and modelled after the famous Xingu Indian Park in Mato Grosso, would protect both the Indians and the ecology of the region from the ravages of outsiders and give ~~the~~ the Yanomamö a chance to adapt to Brazilian society at their own pace.

Support for the Yanomamö Park proposal has already been obtained from the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, the Brazilian Anthropological Association, the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science, the Brazilian Press Association, and numerous lawyers, writers, and artists in Brazil. As a result of this expression of public support, the Brazilian government has stopped all mining activities in the Yanomamö area. No decision, however, has been made on the establishment of the Indian park; nor have steps been taken by Brazilian authorities to vaccinate the Yanomamö against measles, tuberculosis, influenza, malaria, river blindness, and a host of other lethal diseases.

The fate of the Yanomamö may ultimately depend on the international sentiment that can be raised in support of the park proposal. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs in Copenhagen, Survival International in London, and the Anthropology Resource Center in Boston have just published a report titled The Yanomamö in Brazil: 1979. These groups have also launched a letter-writing campaign directed at Brazilian authorities and international relief agencies and calling for the immediate

creation of the Yanomamö Park. Letters have been sent to Venezuelan officials asking for a similar arrangement to protect the more numerous Yanomamö population who live on that side of the frontier.

Much is written these days about the extinction of some rare species of bird, fish, or other animal. When the white whale is in jeopardy or the bald eagle is on the verge of extinction, the international community is morally indignant and seeks some form of ameliorative action. Where is the international community when an entire race of people is being destroyed?

The Yanomamö Indians occupy only a small fraction of the national territories of Venezuela and Brazil. The governments of these countries can insure the territorial and cultural integrity of these people and still exploit the rich resources of the Amazon region. Many environmental scientists have pointed out that indigenous peoples, rather than being an obstacle to Amazon progress, possess the only knowledge for the region's rational occupation and development. The Yanomamö Indians have lived in the Amazon basin for centuries without polluting its waters and lands. The present park proposal is a last-ditch attempt to insure that these unique people and their environment will be provided with the minimal conditions to survive. As such, the Yanomamö Park proposal deserves the active support of people of conscience throughout the world.

-- Shelton H. Davis

Note: Shelton H. Davis, author of Victims of the Miracle: Development and the Indians of Brazil (Cambridge University Press, 1977), is director of the Anthropology Resource Center in Boston, Massachusetts.