

ARC

anthropology · resource · center

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Crawford: Did you do anything about it when you found out what was happening?

West: Well, there wasn't much I could do. I mentioned it to a few people, you know? But I couldn't actually do anything unless what was happening was against the interests of British subjects. Which, of course, this wasn't. Quite the contrary. Rather more possible for someone in your line, I would have thought.

Crawford: You're kidding. Anthropologists aren't supposed to make comments on political matters, in fact, as far as I can see, they aren't supposed to make comments on anything. They're supposed to forget the people they're working with are human and treat them as if they were an ancient monument or a graph or a geological formation. That's what we call science. If I'm writing a thesis about marriage practices among the Bororo, for example, and I get tired of writing about exogamous moieties and say, listen, the truth is, it doesn't matter who they marry because the way things are going they'll all be dead in ten years, I'd be told, that's not anthropology, it's journalism.

--Act One, Scene 5  
"Savages"  
by Christopher Hampton

September 1979

Dear Friends:

The above dialogue from Christopher Hampton's play Savages casts a special light on the ethical dilemmas of anthropologists who know about the situation of the Yanomamo Indians in South America. The Yanomamo number nearly 17,000 people and live in scores of isolated villages along the border between Venezuela and Brazil. For several years, the Yanomamo have been the subject of intense ethnographic studies by North American and European anthropologists. Numerous books and scholarly articles have been written about the customs of the Yanomamo. Several documentary films have been made about their culture. Almost every student of anthropology has read about the Yanomamo, retaining

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a picture of these people as "fierce warriors" who blow drugs and beat their women and children in the rainforests of South America.

But, the above image-- whether correct or not-- only presents part of the picture of the Yanomamo. Since 1974, the Brazilian government has been constructing a major highway along the southern part of the Yanomamo territory. Diseases carried by highway workers have already destroyed 13 Yanomamo villages along the first 100 kilometers of the new road. Large deposits of uranium and other minerals have been discovered on Yanomamo lands and cattle-ranching and colonization projects are planned. Predictably, the Brazilian government has done very little to protect the health and safety of the Yanomamo. Only 250 people have been vaccinated by the government against tuberculosis; none have been vaccinated against smallpox, influenza, measles, river blindness, and a host of other diseases known to exist in the area.

To date, neither the Brazilian nor Venezuelan governments have provided adequate protection to Indian lands. Last year, the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) did decree 21 miniscule reserves for the Yanomamo, but these land areas would threaten the physical and cultural integrity of the tribe. FUNAI's own data show that fifty-eight villages with a population of 2,900 people, or 34.5 percent of the Brazilian Yanomamo population, are not included in the reserve program. These reserves are scattered throughout the Yanomamo territory, and highways and settlement corridors are planned to run between almost all of them. Further, the FUNAI proposal has no provisions for satisfying the demographic, ecological, and subsistence needs of the tribe.

This June a group of Brazilian citizens presented a counter-proposal to the Brazilian Minister of the Interior calling for the creation of a 16-million acre Yanomamo Indian Park. The purpose of the park proposal is to establish a single, integrated land area for the Yanomamo that would protect them from dangerous contacts and provide them with the conditions to adapt to Brazilian society on their own rather than outsiders' terms. At the same time, several international organizations were contacted to provide support for the Yanomamo Park proposal. Specifically, the Brazilian Commission asked Survival International in England, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs in Denmark, and the Anthropology Resource Center in the United States to begin a petition campaign directed toward Brazilian authorities and calling for the immediate creation of a Yanomamo Indian Park.

In response to this call for support, ARC is distributing the enclosed information packet and calling upon anthropologists, students, and other concerned individuals to hold a series of forums on the Yanomamo situation during the week of November 5 through 9, 1979. We believe that people in this country should be particularly concerned about what is happening to Brazilian Indians. In both countries, indigenous peoples and cultures are being disrupted in a rapacious quest for minerals, energy resources and land. Many U.S. corporations have large investments

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in the Brazilian Amazon. The deforestation and destruction of the Amazon Basin are environmental problems whose consequences are world-wide in scope.

What can you do to help this effort?

- 1) Organize a small forum or teach-in on your campus during the week of November 5 through 9. You may wish to reproduce some of the materials in the enclosed information packet. You may also wish to contact special resource persons on your campus as speakers, or order films about the Yanomamo or other Native American groups in North and South America.
- 2) Gather signatures for the enclosed petition and return them to ARC in Cambridge or the Commission for the Creation of a Yanomamo Park in Sao Paulo. These groups will insure that your expression of support for the Yanomamo Park proposal reaches international agencies and Brazilian authorities.
- 3) Organize a permanent Yanomamo Support Committee on your campus. The international campaign in behalf of the Yanomamo Park proposal may take several months to prove successful. With groups organized around the country, ARC can contact you and call upon your committee for needed support.

ARC, Survival International, and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs are about to release a 170-page report titled The Yanoama in Brazil: 1979. This report contains two essays by anthropologists on the present situation of the Yanomamo and a full English translation of the Yanomamo Park proposal. Copies of this report will be available from ARC in the fall. You may wish to write to ARC and purchase copies of the report for the forums you are planning in November. Our address is: Anthropology Resource Center, P.O. Box 90, Cambridge, MA 02138.

The Yanomamo deserve more than just being another ethnographic curiosity in the long Western literature on other peoples and cultures throughout the world. Please join us in this important effort to insure that the Yanomamo people survive.

Sincerely,



Shelton H. Davis  
Director, ARC