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Letters to the Editor

Most Kayapos Protect Their Patch of Amazon

Your Dec. 29 article "Kayapo Indians Lose their 'Green' Image" points out that in the 1980s the Kayapo Indians became famous for their opposition to dam building in the Amazon, but have since become infamous for their dealings with loggers and miners. The article focuses unduly on the excesses of a few Kayapo leaders while ignoring the long-standing opposition of many Kayapo to logging and mining.

No minimally informed environmentalist can doubt that legal protection of the Kayapo areas is an enormous gain for the forest. While the rest of southern Para state in the burning season resembles a war zone, with fires raging across the ragged checkerboard of ranches and failing cattle pasture, the forest stands substantially intact in the Indian areas. Comparison of satellite images from the 1970s and 1990s shows, in clear contrast to the surrounding areas, that the frontier of deforestation has not followed the logging roads to the Kayapo lands. This is because the Kayapo have not let the cattle ranchers and colonists in.

Now new legislation, approved by a special commission of the Brazilian Congress, would permit logging in indigenous areas, but only if in the community's interest and if done on an environmentally sustainable basis. Sustained-yield timber harvesting, coupled with enforcement of legislation against depredation and minimal government assistance, could very well leave the Kayapo—and the forest—better off than they are today.

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