

INSTITUTO
SOCIOAMBIENTAL
Documentação
Fonte: NEWS WEEK
Data: 27/11/2000 Pg 10-14
Class: Pataxo 281

WORLD AFFAIRS

Not as Green as They Seem

Brazil comes to terms with an unexpected discovery: its indigenous peoples are not always good custodians of the environment. BY MAC MARGOLIS

WHEN CARMEN FLORENCIO was named director of the Monte Pascoal National Park in 1997, she was thrilled. Who wouldn't be?

This was Brazil's Plymouth Rock, the first patch of land the Portuguese navigators sighted when they sailed into New World waters 500 years ago. The park was also one of the few surviving swaths of the Atlantic Forest, one of the most splendid—and endangered—rain forests on the planet. But late last year a band of 300 angry Pataxó Indians marched on Monte Pascoal. Wielding machetes and cudgels and painted for war, they seized park headquarters, a Toyota jeep and park archives, and threw up makeshift huts. Officially, Florêncio is still in charge, but don't tell that to the new management. Their defiant message is scrawled on a banner at the park gate: MONTE PASCOAL BELONGS TO THE PATAXO!

Dramatic as it was, the Indian invasion surprised no one. Park rangers had been sparring with the Pataxó for 40 years. In 1961, when the national park was created, some 220 Indians lived in relative harmony with this pristine tropical wilderness. Today more than 3,000 Pataxó are wedged into three crowded villages, and they have made short work of the forest. Traditional slash-and-burn agriculture and cutting trees to make handicrafts for tourists are only partly to blame. Courted by clandestine lumbermen, Indians have also sold off their most prized timber. Now a third of the forests of Monte Pascoal are gone. In her brief tenure at the park, Florêncio has seen all sorts of plun-



der. But nothing like that of the Pataxó. "Today the Indians are our biggest problem," Florêncio told NEWSWEEK.

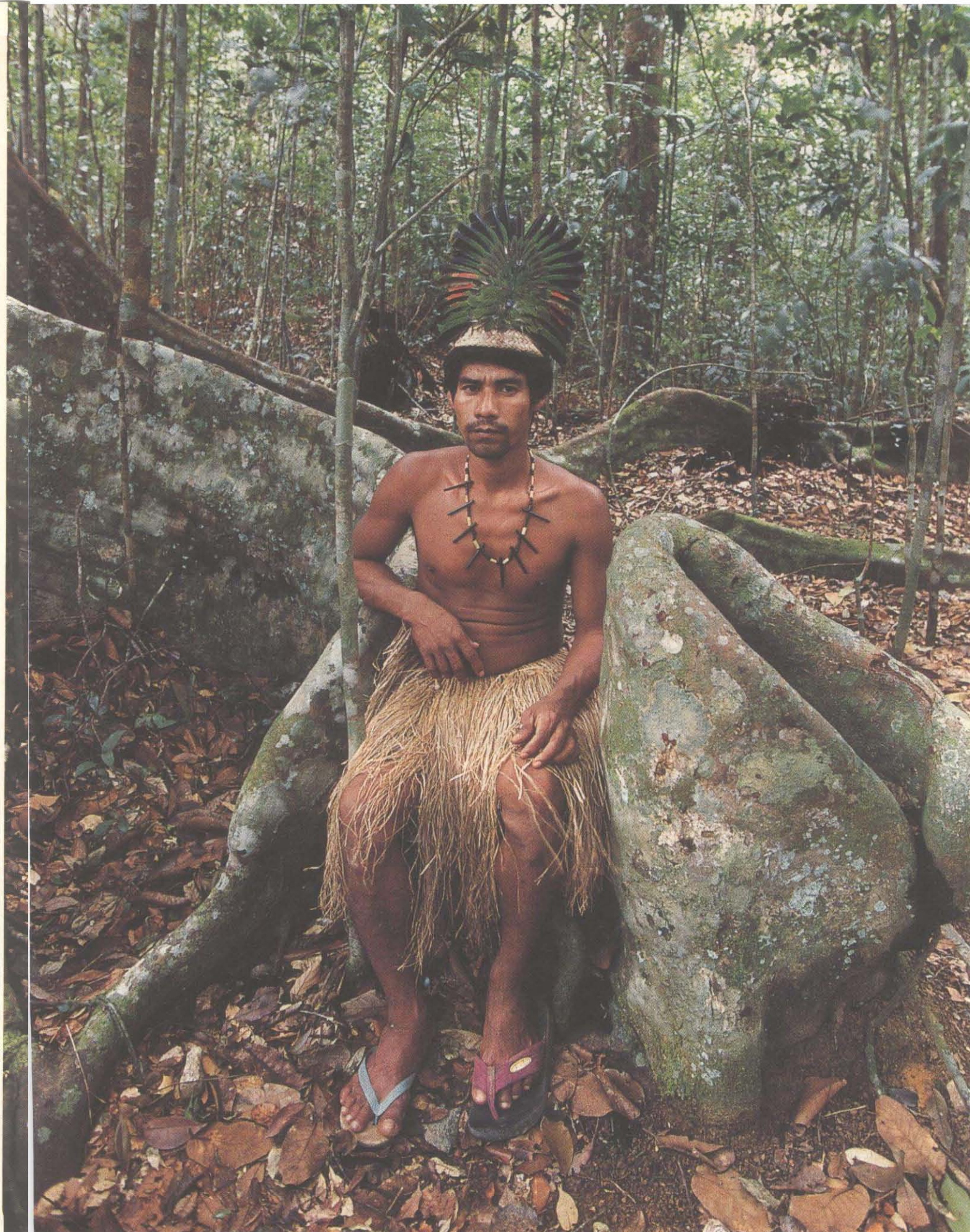
Problem Indians? Weren't the predators supposed to be the guys with the fair skin and the bulldozers? And yet Monte Pascoal is not an isolated case. Brazil has 561 separate areas, which amount to 11 percent of national territory. Virtually all of these areas bear the heavy footprint of their proprietors. From the Amazon rain forest to the southern Atlantic shoreline of Paraná, indigenous peoples have sold off timber, hunted game to exhaustion and allowed their streams and soils to be poisoned and scarred by wildcat miners. The damage goes beyond the Indian reserves. A recent report by the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) showed that Indians have annexed huge tracts of 10 separate national parks and biosphere reserves. Of course, compared with what followed after

Europeans first "discovered" Brazil, the Indians' impact on the Brazilian wilderness has been child's play. And they have often been encouraged to gut their forests by outsiders, from poachers to marauding gold prospectors. Yet whether seduced, tricked or simply seizing opportunities, Indians are now part of Brazil's environmental problem.

In one sense, there's nothing new about this; it's as old as man's first encounter with the Americas. Environmental historians have long known that Native Americans, north and south, could be as predatory and polluting as anyone else. "None of the indigenous groups in the Americas was preservationist," says Brazilian anthropologist Antônio Risélio. Yet for years it has been comforting to believe otherwise. At some point late last century the indigenous peoples of the world were drafted for an odd assignment. Natural-born guardians of wilderness, they were called, hard-wired for conservation. Foggy and romantic though it may have been, the notion of the "green" Indian carried considerable clout during the 1980s and 1990s, when tropical forests were falling and burning from Malaysia to the Amazon.

Indigenous peoples began to appropriate some of the same rhetoric. "Indians are the voice of the land," said Marcos Terena, an articulate Brazilian Indian leader, at the Earth Summit held in Brazil in 1992. "We believe the earth speaks through us." Those ideas still have resonance today. "Indians know how to take care of the wilderness," says Zezito Ferreira, a Pataxó leader and

Slash and burn: The Pataxó Indians





now self-appointed park ranger at Monte Pascoal. "We can do a better job at the park than the government." Defenders of indigenous peoples acknowledge the damage to the park but claim that Indians have mostly been pawns in the hands of others. "Blaming Indians for destroying the forests is like blaming minors recruited by slum drug traffickers," says Mario Montovani, head of SOS Mata Atlântica, a green group sympathetic to the Pataxó. "They have been victims for 500 years."



Victims have rights; the question is, do they have responsibilities, too? In Brazil indigenous groups increasingly want to reclaim traditional lands—on their own terms. "Indians aren't necessarily interested in preservation," says João Pacheco, an anthropologist at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro. "They want development." That's placed Indians at odds with their erstwhile allies. Conservationists argue that Indian advocates are turning a blind eye to plunder. Supporters of Indians accuse the greens of wanting a "wilderness without people," says Montovani of SOS Mata Atlântica. And the clash between the two agendas has played havoc with government policy. Brazil's beleaguered federal Indian agency, FUNAI, is constantly at war with the environmental authority, IBAMA, leaving the police and the courts dizzy in the cross-fire.

More than a pretty vista is at stake. Half a millennium ago, the Atlantic Forest was a splendid mantle spun of a thousand shades

of green, dun and ocher, tumbling along the broad eastern shoulder of South America. Scientists probing under its steamy canopy have unveiled more biodiversity—up to 800 tree species in a hectare—than even in the exuberant Amazon rain forest. Now the *mata atlântica* is in tatters, thanks to centuries of plunder by lumbermen, ranchers and settlers to whom forests were either obstacles or booty. Less than 7 percent of the forest remains, and only a fraction of that may still be salvageable.

In the last half millennium, native Brazilians have fared no better. Five million strong at the time of "discovery," by the mid-20th century Indians were a disease-ridden, crowded and vanishing people. But thanks to improved health care and official aid, their numbers are growing again. And another sort of revival has boomed. In the 1960s anthropologists had identified 12 separate indigenous groups in Brazil's northeast. Today there are 29 groups. Why? Because the Constitution of 1988 assured



Save the rain forest—but from whom? (Clockwise from top left) Pataxó gather at Monte Pascoal headquarters, Children playing on illegally harvested logs, Sting meets with Amazonian Indians, a captured tropical bird

indigenous peoples claims to their ancestral lands. Suddenly there was a reason to be Indian again, and with the aid of smart lawyers and militant advocates, Indians and "neo-Indians" began to petition for redress. "Today it's much better to be an Indian than just a poor peasant," says anthropologist Pacheco.

But that's not necessarily the best thing for the environment. The Pataxó, a nomadic people, have spent centuries fleeing enemy tribes and encroaching white settlers. In 1980 they celebrated a land settle-

ment that granted them 8,200 hectares of Monte Pascoal park. Yet when fires swept the park in 1989, the Pataxó tried to stop the firefighters. Later, park rangers found out why: the Pataxó were protecting secret stashes of logs they had sold to outlaw lumbermen. "If the damage is not curbed, one more valuable nature preserve is going to be leveled," says Gustavo Martinelli, a botanist who has spent

years researching the bromeliads of the Atlantic Forest. "The Pataxó could be digging their own graves." Even more worrying are the actions of the Kayapó. Known equally for colorful headdresses and their talent for attracting foreign support, the Kayapó were once the darlings of the green movement. In 1989 the rock star Sting joined their cause, helicoptering into a famous gathering of Indian peoples at the Amazonian town of Altamira. The British cosmetics boutique the Body Shop began buying their essences and

oils for a line of rain-forest beauty products. Yet the Kayapó have not always had a green thumb. In the early '90s, they took royalties on a giant gold mine carved out of their land. The gold is now mostly gone, but the Kayapó have found an even more prized commodity: mahogany. Chieftains have not hesitated to call on outlaw lumbermen to bootleg this "green gold."

In the mahogany rush, the Brazilian government can't win. Often the Indians end up cheated by the loggers. Yet when the authorities crack down on the offenders, the Indians—with a little under-the-table cash—often rally to the bandits' aid. In 1998 a band of armed Kayapó threatened a team of forest police who were conducting a bust of illegal lumber companies in Resende, a key stop on the black-market mahogany trade. It took hours of tense negotiation and a police convoy to rescue the forest inspectors. "One day there is going to be bloodshed," predicts Eduardo Martins, a former IBAMA director.

The real tragedy is that nobody has more to lose than the Indians. A handful of their leaders have become famously rich pillaging the forest—buying airplanes, motorboats, pickup trucks and video cameras. But the majority still live in destitution,

drowning in debts to the town pharmacy and grocery store. And now the mahogany is growing scarce. "Indians are depleting their natural resources, yet they remain as poor and desperate as ever," says Sergio Brant, a researcher at the conservation unit of IBAMA.

The sensible use of natural resources would help the impoverished villages. Yet the rules governing Indian lands are a tangle of contradictions. Under the old forestry code, Indian reservations were off-limits to commercial ventures. But the 1988 Constitution lifted that ban, subject to congressional approval and payment of royalties to the Indians. Enabling legislation was never passed, leaving impoverished Indians and the cowboy capitalists of the backlands to slash and burn at will. To make matters worse, FUNAI, the government agency in charge of Indian affairs, is chronically underfunded and uninspired and has seen 25 directors come and go in 34 years.

Tired of handouts and failed official initiatives, some Indian communities have tried to improvise their own solutions. Manoel Santana, 77, is a Pataxó medicine man and a sort of freelance tree planter. For two decades now he has been singlehandedly sowing Boca da Mata, a mostly deforested reservation, with hundreds of seedlings of Brazil wood, *massaranduba* and *oticica*, monumental trees with musical names that once flourished there. But it is lonely work. "No one is interested in planting around here," Santana laments. "They think I'm crazy."

Other tribes have sought aid from friends at home and abroad. Some use latex, milked from the wild rubber groves of Acre, in western Amazonia, to make ecologically correct jeans, tennis shoes, knapsacks and datebooks. Hermès, the French luxury-goods house, is a key customer. The Xikrin Indians, cousins to the Kayapó, have plans to selectively cut and sell their valuable hardwood instead of playing into the hands of unscrupulous lumbermen. But harvesting timber without degrading the forest is tricky work in the Amazon, with its confounding mosaic of interlocking species. "Mahogany is one of the hardest species of all to manage," says Philip Fearnside, a tropical ecologist at Brazil's Institute of Amazonian Studies. Still, the Xikrin are at least making an effort to get things right in a land where so much has gone wrong.

Though it is a relatively small patch of Brazil, the trouble at Monte Pascoal is emblematic; the place is a reference for every schoolchild. On April 22 Brazil will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the coming of the Europeans, and by rights Monte

Pascoal ought to be the centerpiece. Instead, it could turn into a major embarrassment. IBAMA has won a judicial order to restore the park to government hands, but police are keeping their distance. Evicting native Brazilians on the eve of such a momentous national celebration could make for disastrous headlines. "If they try to expel us from here, blood will run," vows the Pataxó's Ferreira.

There has been vague talk of a deal to

allow the Indians and the government to manage the park together. But the Brazilians aren't holding their breath, least of all Carmen Florêncio. Unwelcome at the park, she works from her home in Itamaraju, a scruffy cattle town five miles south of Monte Pascoal. And she's put in for a transfer. "I think it's time to be going," Florêncio says.

The Pataxó are staying put. Their sentries mill around the entry to their park like

proud new proprietors, collecting the \$1.80 entry fee from visitors. When the odd tourist comes along, they don't thatch skirts and headdresses and perform the *toré*, a millennial dance-and-prayer ritual. Ferreira, a big-shouldered man in a T shirt and rubber sandals, breaks from the ring of dancers to explain the tradition to visitors. "This is a dance for our ancestors," he says. "We are asking them for strength and guidance." Let's hope the ancestors are listening. ■

The Legacy of Rousseau

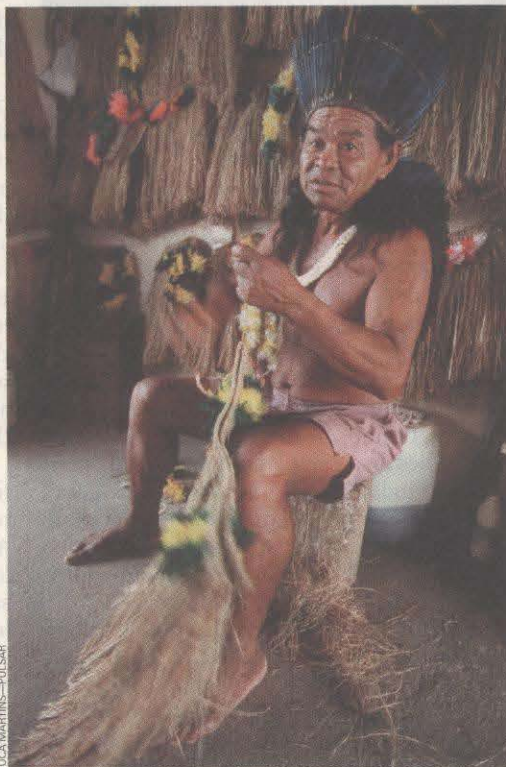
It's amazing how long myths can endure. BY ROBERT WHELAN

THE EUROPEAN EXPLORERS who followed Christopher Columbus to America brought back novelties like potatoes and tobacco. But if we were to draw up a list of early American exports that changed the course of history, one of the most important was a myth: the myth of the noble savage.

The Europeans were overwhelmed by the grandeur of the lands they had reached, and were equally impressed by the people. Columbus wrote to his patrons, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, that the natives were gentle and meek, knowing no evil and possessing no weapons. In 1580 Michel de Montaigne wrote a short essay called "On the Cannibals," in which he provided the blueprint for a whole literature and philosophy of the noble savage. Nearly 200 years later, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote his "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in which he compared civilized man unfavorably with the savage, who needed no more than "food, a female and sleep." Rousseau attributed all of our ills to the bane of private property: the savage was happy because he owned nothing.

Rousseau's ideas about primitive lifestyles are difficult to take seriously now, but they were immensely influential in their time. More recently, the noble savage has been cast in a new role, as a paragon of conservation and the sustainable use of resources. According to this version of the myth, Western man rapes the environment in the selfish pursuit of personal gain while native people live in harmony with nature, preserving stocks for future generations.

This is as false as all other fantasies. We know that native peoples were responsible for the extinction of species on a huge scale long before Europeans appeared on the scene. A whole



Shattered fantasy: Making thatch skirts

bestiary of large mammals was wiped out in North America, including the giant sloth, giant beaver, camel and two-toed horse, before Columbus got there. The Aborigines did the same for large mammals in Australia, and the arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand was quickly followed by the extinction of 34 species of birds.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that attempts to preserve the environment by transferring large tracts of land to native peoples have been frustrated. Placed in the midst of abundant and valuable resources, with no private-property rights and thus no reason to hold back from immediate consumption, native tribes behave as most of us would do under similar circumstances: they grab whatever is going. The idea that native peoples should be noble ecowarriors reflects the current preoccupations of Western intellectuals, not the reality of the lives of indigenous peoples. We project onto these peoples the fads and obsessions of our contemporary lives: we expect them to live in peace, to shun class distinctions, to be kind to animals and respectful of trees.

When indigenous peoples fail to live up to these stereotypes, they quickly find that their Western advocates turn against them. Environmental activists have, for example, destroyed the livelihood of thousands of Inuit with a campaign against the use of seal pelts.

By now, we should have learned from the past. It helps nobody—least of all indigenous peoples themselves—to turn them into characters in the world's largest theme parks, acting out the fantasies of Western environmentalists.

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