Debunking myths: An overview of uncontacted peoples

Photo: Survival International.

It is remarkable that in the second decade of the 21st century much of the available evidence points to the existence of about 100 uncontacted tribes living on our planet.

The fact that there are any at all is testimony to their resilience, ingenuity, self-sufficiency and adaptability.

Few in number and living in remote regions, rich in natural resources which are increasingly coveted by outsiders, they are the most vulnerable peoples on our planet.

The broad definition of uncontacted tribes is those who have no peaceful contact with anyone in the mainstream or dominant society.

Their situation varies widely. Some are on the run, forced into nomadism to survive the invasion of their lands by encroaching society. They rely purely on hunting animals and gathering wild foods, although they may have had vegetable gardens in the past.

Some may have been in touch with colonist or frontier society in the past, even centuries ago, and then retreated from the violence, disease and sometimes enslavement which that brought.

Some may once have been part of larger tribal groups such as the Yanomami and Ayoreo in South America, and then split off to maintain their isolation.

Whatever their history, most been forced to make big changes in their livelihoods and way of life in order to survive. In this sense the term ‘voluntary isolation’, often used in Peru, can be misleading since it implies they have the ‘luxury’ of choice. With the expansion of mega-development and construction projects (oil and gas extraction, mining, hydro-electric dams, highways), logging and agro-industries (cattle, soya and ethanol) many uncontacted peoples face a stark choice: avoid contact at all costs, or risk death from disease and violence at the hands of hired guns, settlers or construction workers.

Everything we know about these peoples makes it clear they seek to maintain their isolation. Sometimes they react aggressively, as a way of defending their territory, or leave signs in the forest warning outsiders away. Some take opportunities to acquire tools and goods through sporadic contact with neighbouring tribes.

All will certainly be watching and monitoring what is happening on and around their land, as historical accounts of violent encounters with outsiders are etched in their collective memory.

Some fundamentalist missionaries also target them. The New Tribes Mission (NTM), for example,

secretly contacted the Zo'é in Brazil in 1987. Shortly after many died from disease. According to Jiruhisú, a Zo'é man, 'Before, when there was no white man, the Zo'é did not have sickness'.

In Paraguay, the NTM organized brutal 'manhunts' using contacted Ayoreo to literally hunt down their uncontacted relatives who were forcibly brought out of the forest. Several died in these encounters, and others succumbed later to disease. Many Ayoreo have now lost their land and have little choice but to work as exploited labourers on the cattle ranches that have taken over much of their territory, and the missionaries who maintain a base nearby, have been supressed many of their rituals.

Disease is a major threat to uncontacted peoples who, because they have been isolated for so long, have not built up immunity to illnesses like flu and measles. Within a year of first contact it is common for up to 50% of a tribe to die from disease. In the early 1980s, exploration by Shell led to contact with the isolated Nahua people in Peru. Within two years more than 50% of the tribe had died.

One Nahua woman recalled this time, 'My people all died. Their eyes started to hurt, they started to cough, they got sick and died right there in the forest.'
When Brazil's military dictatorship bulldozed a highway through part of the Yanomami territory in the 1970s, two isolated Yanomami communities were wiped out from flu and epidemics of measles transmitted by construction workers.

Uncontacted tribes are frequently viewed with a deep-seated racism which sees them as 'backwards', 'primitive' and 'savage'. All too often this prejudice has been used by governments who contact and integrate them into national society to justify the theft of their land and resources.

Despite the vast amount of evidence - including video footage, audio material, photographs, artifacts, testimonies and interviews - that has been collected over the years, some even deny their very existence.

In 2007 Peru's president declared that the isolated Mashco Piro were 'created by environmentalists' opposed to oil exploration. Yine people recently filmed some Mashco Piro who had come to collect turtle eggs on a river bank. More than 70% of the Peruvian Amazon has been carved up into oil concessions, many of which lie on the land of uncontacted people.

When Brazil's indigenous affairs department, FUNAI, released video footage of the nomadic Kawahiva in August 2013, councillors from the local city promptly accused it of 'planting' the tribe there to prevent local people from exploiting the forest.

Some regard isolated indigenous peoples as objects of curiosity to be exploited, wrongly romanticising them as 'relics' from our distant past. Despite a long running campaign by Survival and local organizations, some unscrupulous tour operators are still organising 'human safaris' so tourists can ogle at the recently contacted Jarawa people on India's Andaman Islands.

The last great refuge of the majority of uncontacted peoples is the Amazon rainforest. Here over 70 groups live in Brazil and 15 in Peru, with a handful in Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia. The only uncontacted people in South America living outside the Amazon Basin are the Ayoreo, who hunt in the dry forests of Paraguay's Chaco.

Brazil and Peru have departments dedicated to monitoring and protecting uncontacted tribes and have a policy of not contacting them. Brazil's unit was established in 1987 when FUNAI decided to

end its disastrous forced contact missions. Now it uses satellite technology to better monitor the whereabouts and welfare of uncontacted indigenous groups, and works with neighbouring tribes and indigenous organizations, who are usually the first to report sporadic contacts or sightings. This has enabled it to map out several significant territories solely for the use of uncontacted indigenous people, minimizing the risk of potentially dangerous contact on the ground.

However FUNAI has not been able to protect many territories from invasion. While the uncontacted indigenous people in the iconic photos from Brazil's Acre state appear to be strong and healthy, with forest gardens full of produce, others like the Awá in Maranhão state have been reduced to tiny, fragmented family groups who number a few dozen, the survivors of brutal land grabbers who targeted and murdered their people. Today they are on the run from the guns and chainsaws, and face genocide unless the government acts now to evict the loggers.

One lone man in Brazil's Rondônia state, known as 'the Last of his Tribe' resists all attempts at contact and survives in a small patch of rainforest in the midst of enormous cattle ranches and soya plantations.

The world's most isolated tribe is probably the Sentinelese, who live on the island of North Sentinel in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, more than 40 isolated tribes have been identified in West Papua, the western half of the island of New Guinea. Although many of these tribes have since had some contact, there are others who choose to remain uncontacted. However, it is almost impossible to obtain accurate information on them because Indonesia has banned human rights organizations and journalists from entering West Papua, so research possibilities are severely limited.

There is nothing inevitable about the disappearance of the world's remaining uncontacted tribes, but their future does lies in our hands and is one of the greatest humanitarian challenges of this century. Whilst their right to self-determination is enshrined in international law, it can only become a reality if governments and multinationals are pushed by public opinion to uphold this fundamental right.

If we do not respect their evident choices and do not stop the destruction of their land, we will lose unique, contemporary and vibrant societies, who are part of our planet's rich diversity, and who play a crucial role in protecting some of the world's greatest biodiversity. We all stand to benefit from their knowledge and stewardship. But if we don't act now, we stand to lose whole peoples, and a part of our own humanity.

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