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PEOPLE PLANTS AND THE PLANET

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Inside this issue...

People and the rainforest
Ghost fishing and toxic time bombs
Ants, sweat and bamboo
Teach on the Beach

People and the rainforest

Robin Hanbury-Tenison

Survival International was founded forty-five years ago by a group of us who were appalled by what was being done to the Indian tribes of Brazil by the very government agency responsible for caring for them.

An article in the *Sunday Times Magazine* by the great travel writer Norman Lewis entitled GENOCIDE, the longest article ever published in the history of the Magazine, exposed what was going on and had a huge impact on world opinion. This brought us together and caused us to found what was to become the global movement for tribal peoples' rights, Survival International.

Two years ago, while putting together my latest book for Thames & Hudson, *The Modern Explorers*, I invited Mirella Ricciardi, the famous photographer of African peoples, to contribute, along with her husband, Lorenzo. She came down to stay with us in Cornwall and, while here, asked me if I had kept the negatives of the photographs taken on my early travels in the 1950s and 60s. I had a rummage through old files and found an archive of long lost negatives, which have since been exhibited at Eden and throughout the country, most notably at the National Theatre, where a quarter of a million people came to see them. They were even projected on the outside of the building for all of London to see!

This year, Survival celebrates its forty-fifth anniversary. The *Sunday*

Times ran another major piece to mark the event, this time using some outstanding recent photographs by the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. It was this article that prompted Tim Smit to write to me suggesting we draw the themes of people and forests together at Eden to make an even more powerful point than just concentrating on plants. The result is that human figures will, for the first time, appear among the foliage in the Rainforest Biome. As a start, three of Salgado's photographs and three of mine will be used, with further images planned for the rear wall. Brazilian Indian children may be spotted playing in the rainforest and a Penan hunter seeking his prey with a blowpipe. I will be taking a group of Friends around for a preview on the evening of Thursday October 23 (see page 30 for details).

Salgado is one of the best photographers in the world, with a unique ability to capture people and landscapes. His recent exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London attracted huge crowds. The main virtue of my photographs is that they were taken decades ago, before so much of the environment in which the

people among whom I was fortunate to travel was destroyed and before they were faced with the onslaught of 'progress', invasion by settlers and mass tourism. I first travelled on the island of Borneo in 1958. It was then covered with dense rainforest and was one of the richest ecosystems on earth. The various Dayak peoples lived in longhouses and extracted a good living from the fish which then still teemed in the clear rivers, the fertile soil on the river banks and the wild game, still plentiful in the magnificent forests. The nomadic Penan travelled lightly through the wilderness harvesting the wild sago, which had time to regenerate before they returned, and pursuing the large herds of wild pig which rootled through the undergrowth. Over the years I was often able to travel with the Penan and I came to admire their astonishing knowledge of the myriad plants and animals on which they lived. Moving swiftly with hunting dogs and blowpipes, we lived off the land, leaving barely a trace of our passing.

Years later, I spent fifteen months in the heart of the Borneo forest leading the Royal Geographical Society's largest scientific expedition. Well over a hundred scientists came and went, studying how it all worked and in the process initiating global concern for rainforests. The most striking discovery for me was to see that all the scientists without exception – and they were the best in the world – recognised that the many locals with whom we

“It's very important for the governments of the world and the people of the world to listen to us the indigenous peoples who have lived on the planet for thousands of years. We have to help the world when it's crying out... Everybody, the politicians and the UN have to listen and respect the earth and stop destroying it and taking out the riches.”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, shaman and Yanomami leader known as the 'Dalai Lama of the rainforest'



A little Ot Danum girl running through the forest far up the Melawi river in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of the island of Borneo. She was as at home there as any western child in a playground and already knew the names and uses of many plants. 1973. Picture © Robin Hanbury-Tenison


worked, both nomadic Penan and settled Berawan from the nearest longhouse, all knew and understood the forest, its plants and its animals far better than they ever could. While we were giving everything Latin names and working out symbiotic relationships, they knew what everything's real value was: whether it was edible or poisonous; what it could be

used to make or build.

And this lesson is only now being realised in the much wider context of global deforestation. If you look at a satellite map overlay of, for example, the Amazon and compare it with similar maps from a few decades ago, you will see that much of the forest has gone. Strangely, you may notice that most of the remaining areas of

forest cover have straight lines and wonder why. The reason is that, to their credit, the Brazilian government has recognised 691 Indigenous Territories, covering about 13% of the country's land area. The somewhat arbitrary boundaries of these lands, as well as the various National Parks, make the straight lines because the Indians protect their land and do not, in most

cases, cut down their forests. They are, therefore, manifestly the best guardians of the environment. This is one of Survival's main messages, because so many of the issues facing tribal people revolve around land rights.

By including images of tribal people within the rich and beautiful habitats of the tropical Biome at Eden, we should be able to get across this essential message, and spread the word that people and plants need each other. As Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance, Eden's scientific director, says, *'Rainforest peoples are the original tropical ecologists. We still have much to learn from them if we are to manage rainforest ecosystems in a sustainable manner. The recording and preservation of this indigenous knowledge is vital to our future survival.'* 



The Awá are finding it increasingly difficult to find game in the forest, and Awá have been brutally attacked by loggers whilst out hunting. Monkeys, peccaries and tapir are all running away. 'Everything is dying. We are all going to go hungry. We are not finding any game, because the white people use guns and kill all the game,' Pire'i Ma'a, Awá man. Picture © Sebastiao Salgado / Amazonas / nbpictures

Eden's Rainforest Canopy Walkway

Since we opened in 2001, the Eden rainforest - in the largest conservatory in the world - has nearly reached the roof. In 2013 we started to build our Rainforest Canopy Walkway to enable everyone to explore the experience from a new level. The first phase brought a fully accessible route to canopy level and introduced the story of biodiversity, of the plants and of the people who provide the foundations to the story. Our 'People of the Rainforest' exhibition is currently providing more fascinating detail.

Phase 2, planned to start in 2015, brings the 'Weather Maker' to the Canopy Walkway and shares the vital and timely story of how the planet's rainforests regulate our world's climate. You will be able to journey through mists and clouds in the canopy, shelter from tropical storms, explore behind our huge crashing waterfall, trek across wobbly (or alternatively not so wobbly) rope bridges in the treetops, measure the weather and discover fascinating stories about the climate. We will also share more ways of helping to conserve these green guardians of our climate.

We have raised a proportion of the funds necessary to bring this next phase to life. We dearly hope we can start work in the new year. If you would like to discover more or to help us raise the remaining funds please visit: www.edenproject.com/support-us/future-plans/rainforest-canopy-walkway

About the author

Robin Hanbury-Tenison OBE, DL is the doyen of British explorers. Conservationist, broadcaster, film maker, author of over 20 books, lecturer, campaigner and farmer, he is one of the few remaining British explorers who merits the name. He is a Founder and President of Survival International. A Gold Medallist of the Royal Geographical Society, he led their largest expedition, taking 120 scientists to live for fifteen months in the interior of Borneo. This research and his subsequent book started the international concern for tropical rainforests.



To find out more visit:
www.survivalinternational.org



It is thought that there are around 100
uncontacted Awá who still live in the
rainforest without any interaction with
outsiders. They are some of the last
uncontacted people on the planet.

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