

Background Information

Spokesperson for Indigenous Group

Matuwe, Yanomami tribe member

My name is Matuwe. I am one of the remaining 20 000 Yanomami people who live in the rain forest of Brazil. The name “Yanomami” means “humanity,” but I wonder if there will be any of my people left to answer proudly to the name Yanomami in the future. I am here to plead with you to stop further development of the rain forest as it is destroying our way of life. Before the *nabuh* or foreigners came, our medicine men were able to cure our illnesses with the help of our spirits and plants from the jungle but now my people die of diseases we have never heard of.

I would like to tell you about the simple lives my people led in the rain forest before the government of Brazil allowed big businesses and *nabuh* to invade.

I live with my family and 20 other families that I am related to in a small village. We live in a large common dwelling called a *shabano* or *yano*. It is a big ring-shaped structure with an open-air plaza in the middle. The plaza is a wide-open space for dancing and ceremonies and is owned by the whole village. Each family has its own area under the covered part around the edge. In our *yano*, we sleep in hammocks hung in triangles around campfires. These fires, used for cooking, warmth and keeping mosquitoes away, burn day and night. Each person has a hammock except the young who sleep with their mothers. Some *shabanos* can house up to 400 people, but usually fewer people live in them. The jungle provides us with the materials to make our home—trees for poles, liana for ropes and palm leaves that we tie together to make a roof.

There are about 320 Yanomami villages in the rain forest. The villages are scattered throughout the forest. The distance between the villages varies between a walk of a few hours to several days. Today, almost all of the Yanomami are “forest people”—they live deep in the Amazon forest. Only five percent live along the major rivers—they are “river people.” The river people live by fishing and trading goods, such as canoes and hooks, with other villages. I am one of the forest people. We grow crops, hunt animals and gather fruits. We rely on the jungle for materials we use for everyday life, such as the poisonous ayori-toto vine which we use to help us fish in the river.

The forest people clear land of trees, burning the stumps and brush so we can grow crops of manioc maize, yams and plantain. Other crops include papayas, sugar cane, bananas and tobacco. We grow around 60 crops—20 of which are for food and the rest for medicine. Garden farming is time consuming. We spend up to two hours a day working at growing crops. Once the soil no longer successfully grows crops, my people move to a different area and clear the land for planting. The Amazon soil is not fertile so we have to clear a new garden every two or three years. After a time, Mother Earth will return the land we left to its former state of a lush jungle.

We do not wear much in the way of clothing because the weather is very warm. However, we decorate our bodies with red and purple dyes, feathers, cotton and scented leaves and seeds. We pierce our ears, cheeks or lips to insert blossoms or slivers of wood. We enjoy the beauty of Mother Earth in our festivities.

Our children learn at an early age of the bounty provided by the Earth in their play. Boys imitate their fathers in hunting and stalking animals and learn the fine art of creating weapons. Girls learn to care for children, find and prepare food obtained from the jungle, plant crops, spin cotton and weave hammocks.

But I must tell you that our very lives are threatened by the coming of the *nabuh*. They come with their big machines and dig up the ground and the riverbank. Their factories dump chemicals in our rivers, destroying the plant and fish life and our drinking water. They strip our forests to feed their furnaces and to make lumber for people who are not even from Brazil. These men come with guns that threaten and kill my people. Diseases such as influenza, colds, malaria, tuberculosis and measles, which we have never known before, are killing us. Recently, many of our people died because of diseases brought to our area by gold miners. Our shaman and the spirits are powerless to cure these diseases. We are being driven further and further from land we have occupied for thousands of years.

Even our own government does little to help us. Until 1986, we were able to qualify as voters only if we could pass a literacy test. Because we live far from other people and their culture, reading is not a skill that is familiar to us. International protests against Brazil's treatment of the Yanomami and the destruction of the rain forest have pressured the government to set aside land in reservations for my people and other Indigenous groups. Sadly, the government does not enforce the laws they created to help us. Illegal gold miners still invade our territory and those who would destroy our homes and way of life continue their path of destruction.

For thousands of years, the rain forest provided my people with everything we needed to survive. In turn, my people lived in harmony with nature. With the coming of the *nabuh*, our home is being destroyed and we are in danger of becoming a lost people. If we are to survive as a people and maintain our way of life, all activity in the jungle must stop immediately. On behalf of all Yanomami, I implore you to help save us!

Adapted from Don Northey, Jan Nicol and Roland Case, eds., *Brazilian Rain Forest* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2002). Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.