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DIVERSITY ACROSS
AMERICA

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REVISITING THE
LESSONS OF JAPANESE
INTERNMENT

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



*"Who's going to fight
for the isolated ones,
if not us?"*

TAINAKY TENETEHAR
GUAJAJARA TRIBESMAN
AND FOREST GUARDIAN

LAST TRIBES OF THE AMAZON

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By CHRIS FAGAN

PERU

Shuri carries a wooden bow and two six-foot arrows topped with razor-sharp bamboo.

He's about 60 years old, and his deeply furrowed brow hints at a hard life in the jungle. Stopping at the top of a hill, he turns to me and lifts his faded red shirt to show a six-inch scar on his side just below his ribs. "Mashco," he says quietly, referring to the Mashco-Piro tribe. He holds up his bow as if shooting, then moves his hand to the scar, closes his eyes, and grimaces to mimic pain.

Shuri is a Mastanahua, one of several tribes that inhabit the remote southern Peru-Brazil borderlands. Fifteen years ago, evangelical missionaries came to the Curanja River to lure his people out of the forest. The missionaries built a village, cleared land for a farm, recruited interpreters from local tribes, and left gifts along hunting trails. Eventually Shuri and his two wives (who are sisters) and mother-in-law joined the missionaries. The rest of his group, perhaps 20 people, chose to stay in the forest with other isolated tribes—including their mortal enemies, the Mashco-Piro.

We reach a clearing, and Elena, the younger of Shuri's wives, emerges from a perfectly camouflaged palm-frond shelter. She's wearing a red soccer shirt advertising the U.K.'s Arsenal team, a gift from guards with the Ministry of Culture, stationed downstream. Her face is painted with indigo dots from huito fruit, and like Shuri, she wears a metal nose ornament and the top of her head has been shaved like that of a Franciscan monk. She shouts something at Celia, our interpreter. "She's hungry, and her stomach hurts," Celia says. "She wants pills."

I've known Shuri and Elena since 2006, through my work implementing conservation and sustainable development projects in indigenous communities downstream. I've been witness to their ongoing struggle to assimilate into modern society with minimal support.

On this occasion photographer Charlie Hamilton James and I have come to the Curanja River, some 15 miles south of Peru's border with Brazil, to document the lives of remote tribes and the pressures facing those still holding on in isolation. We are close to the Alto Purús National Park, which is overlapped by the Mashco Piro Indigenous Reserve for isolated tribes. The park, at nearly 9,700 square miles, is Peru's largest, and it shares a border with the biodiverse Manú National Park to the south.

This massive Purús-Manú landscape is home to one of the highest



When missionaries contacted some of the Mastanahua tribe in 2003, only Shuri, his two wives, and his mother-in-law chose to end their isolation in the forest. They trade with local villagers and stay in touch with the 20 or so migratory members of their group.







The Yurúa River meanders near the Peru-Brazil border. Illicit logging in the area's protected forests feeds timber such as big-leaf mahogany to global markets. Logging also threatens the survival of the country's estimated 15 remaining isolated tribes.

On the Yurúa River, Gerson Mañaningo Odicio lives in the path of nomads who sometimes steal villagers' crops and goods, like machetes and clothes. Peru doesn't compensate for such losses, causing resentment that can spark violence against the nomads.



concentrations of isolated indigenous people left anywhere on Earth, as well as several groups like Shuri's who are in the early stages of contact. While threatened by various causes of deforestation, including logging and road construction, this remote and relatively intact area stands in stark contrast with the diminished forests of eastern Brazil where the Awá live.

THE WORD "ISOLATION" is relative: The tribes are astutely aware of their surroundings, and all but the remotest groups have used metal tools for decades and therefore have had some contact with the outside world. Many are descendants of those who fled to remote headwaters to escape enslavement and devastating epidemics during the rubber boom more than a century ago. Subsequent contact with missionaries, loggers, oil and gas workers, and other outsiders often resulted in more violence and disease. That they continue to live in isolation is a conscious decision, in their view essential for survival.

In recent years, despite this hard history, more isolated people have been venturing out of the deep forest to initiate contact. They're being seen on the banks of major rivers, and they've increased their raids on remote indigenous villages and government outposts in protected areas. What explains this? Is curiosity about settled life or the desire for manufactured items finally overtaking the tribes' fear of outsiders? Or are these forays more a result of external threats compromising their territories?

The most recent tribe to initiate permanent contact is the Txapanawa, or People of the Xinane, on the Envira River, across the border in Brazil, less than 50 miles from Shuri and Elena's shelter. In June 2014 a group of five young men and two women entered the village of Simpatia complaining of hunger and asking for bananas. Later they described a recent attack, most likely by drug traffickers—*narcos*—in which many of their tribe had been killed. For several years *narcos* had been using a nearby government post as their own base.

Situations like the one in Simpatia bring up important questions about governments' ethical responsibilities to protect tribes while respecting their rights to self-determination. Peru, like Brazil, has a no-contact policy for isolated tribes. The strategy is to create protected areas off-limits to outsiders, control access to these areas, and be prepared to respond when tribes initiate

contact. The process of contact, however, can be drawn out over many years. At what point should the government intervene? Critics of the no-contact policy argue that the government should be more proactive and initiate controlled contact with emerging tribes to prevent violence and deadly epidemics. One thing everyone agrees on is that the number of contact events will increase if Peru continues to promote policies to open up more of the forest for extractive industries.

Case in point: In January 2018 Peru's Congress passed a controversial law declaring the construction of roads in remote parts of the Amazon to be "of priority and national interest." Yet less than two months later, the Ministries of Transportation, Culture, and the Environment signed a supreme decree in opposition to the law, which clarified that all new roads must respect environmental laws, natural protected areas, and reserves for isolated tribes.

The ministries' swift response indicates that after decades of ignoring the rights of its isolated tribes, even doubting their very existence, Peru is making progress in balancing the need for development with protecting their territories. The Ministry of Culture, which is responsible for indigenous affairs, has proposed five new reserves for isolated tribes and is developing first ever protection plans for four existing reserves. Meanwhile, a consortium of indigenous NGOs led by the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest is proposing a more than 34,000-square-mile protected corridor for tribes in isolation and initial contact, with the Purús-Manú landscape as its core.

While most of the corridor is already protected, legal recognition of it would consolidate the area, facilitating new legislation and on-the-ground protection measures. Furthermore, it would raise international awareness about this truly remarkable place. Against this hopeful backdrop, I think of Shuri and Elena and whether, when I visit them again, their extended family will still be choosing to live in isolation in the forest.

Will Peru take advantage of this momentum to give some of the world's last isolated tribes the ability, at last, to control their future? □

Chris Fagan is the founder and executive director of the Upper Amazon Conservancy. He has been working to protect the people and forests of the Peruvian Amazon since 2002.