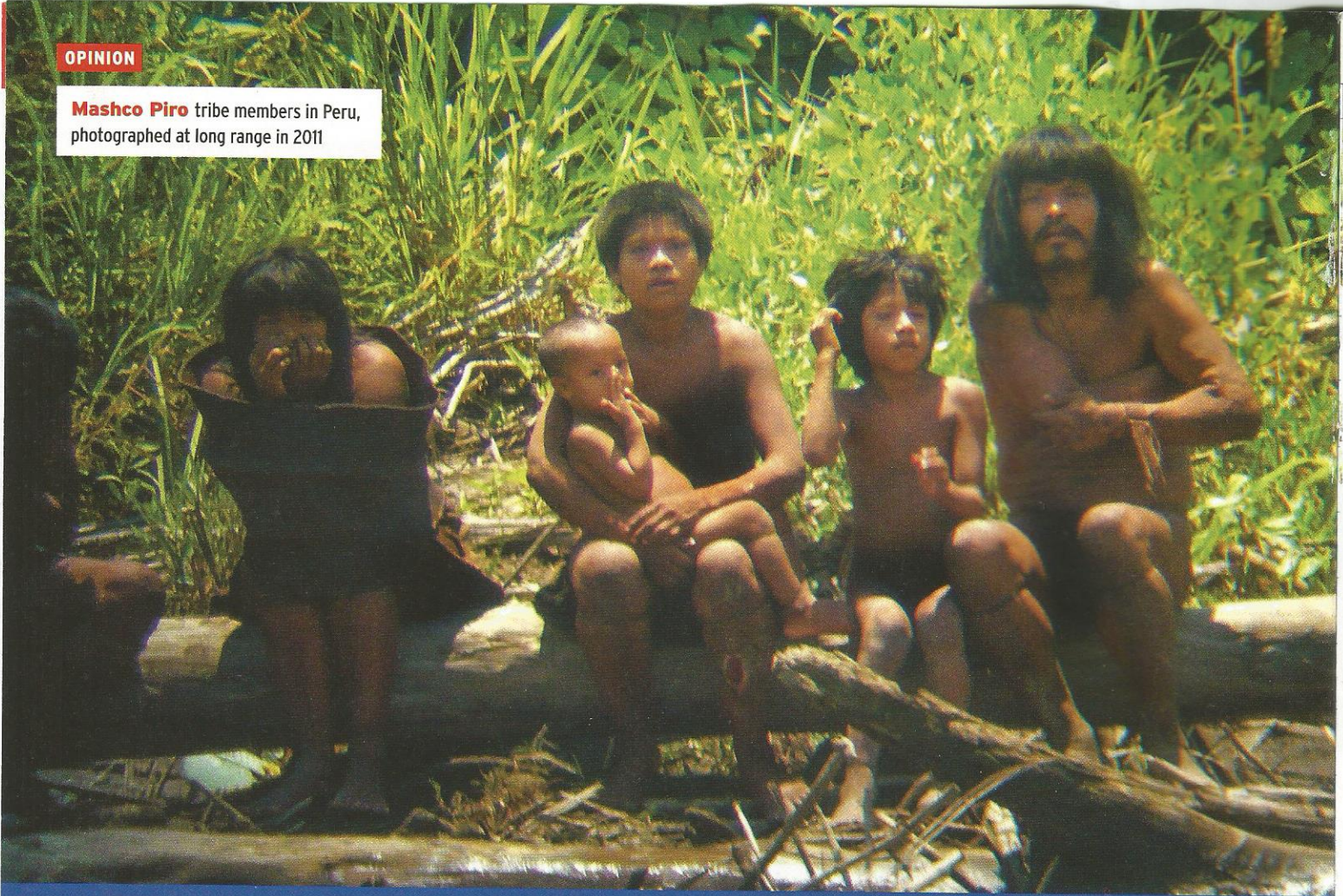


OPINION

Mashco Piro tribe members in Peru, photographed at long range in 2011



Can the Amazon's Last Tribes Survive?

The rainforest may no longer be a refuge for South America's most isolated peoples BY ANDREW LAWLER

The man known as Epa is familiar to the villagers who live along Peru's Curanja River, which flows through some of the densest rainforest of the nation's vast Amazon region.

Most of Epa's tribe, the Mastanahua, remains deep in the jungle, still living like the native peoples did before Europeans arrived hundreds of years ago: unclothed, hunting with bows and arrows, and picking medicinal plants to

ward off illness. But such isolated tribes, which have long avoided outsiders, can no longer depend on the forest as a refuge. In the past year, throughout the Amazon, tribe members have begun to emerge into settled areas in unpredictable and occasionally violent ways—often because of hunger or desperation.

Epa, who I met on a reporting trip last spring, lives with a foot in each world: He has lived most of his life among the jungle's most isolated people and

he boasts of his hunting prowess. But he also wears a soccer shirt and nylon shorts and spends time among the settled villagers on the river.

Last year, Epa's tribe was accused of raiding several of those villages, taking machetes, clothes, and food. In other parts of the rainforest, violence by and against once-isolated people is on the rise. In May, just outside the Manú National Park, a man from the Mashco Piro tribe shot an arrow that killed a 20-year-old villager. Last year, several members of Peru's Xinane tribe waded

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JEAN-PAUL VAN BELLE/STINGER PERU/REUTERS (MASHCO PIRO)

across a river to seek help at a Brazilian settlement. A few of their relatives, they said, had died when they were attacked, possibly by drug traffickers.

In some ways, these conflicts are the last, lingering echoes of the collision of cultures that began in 1492, when Christopher Columbus landed in the New World. Since then, tens of millions of native people have perished—many from European and African diseases—and entire cultures have vanished.

At Risk of Extinction

There are other native tribes living beyond the reach of the global economy—in places like the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean, the mountains of New Guinea in the South Pacific, and elsewhere (see box). But the planet's largest and most diverse isolated cultures are centered in the Amazon, primarily in eastern Peru and western Brazil. They still lack immunity from many Western diseases. And they have no modern weapons to defend themselves from armed intruders like drug smugglers and illegal loggers. They also have no voice in national politics.

Experts and aid groups warn that drug trafficking, logging, mining, and oil drilling, along with a changing climate, vanishing species, and a shrinking forest, put these tribes at risk of extinction. Even TV crews searching for “uncontacted” natives pose a threat; according to a 2008 report by a Peruvian anthropologist, one crew that strayed beyond its permitted



area has been implicated in the deaths of some 20 native people from the flu.

The indigenous people who remain appear to be fighting among themselves for dwindling resources. Epa showed me a scar on his torso—the result of an attack by tribal enemies, he said.

In recent years, Peru has started to set up five reserves, covering an area larger than Massachusetts, as safety zones for the tribes. More are planned.

But both Peru and Brazil see the Amazon as a treasure house of oil, timber, and gold, and that threatens the tribes who live deep in the rainforest. Two huge projects crossing the continent—the \$2.8 billion, 1,600-mile Interoceanic

Highway; and the Chinese-sponsored \$10 billion, 3,300-mile Twin Ocean Railroad—will no doubt stimulate both economies, but at a steep cost. The railroad would plow through tropical savanna and thick forest, cutting across a remote region of Peru that is home to hundreds of indigenous communities.

Development can't be halted, but it can be done more intelligently

and humanely than what happened in the 19th century in the United States, when American Indians were repeatedly pushed off their land to accommodate white settlers.

We know what works. Small frontier posts on rivers can protect reserves from intruders. Immunized health care workers can provide emergency care and snuff out potential epidemics among isolated peoples who emerge for help. Illegal loggers and miners can be prosecuted. Road and railroad construction and oil exploration can be kept outside the borders of reserves and parks. None of this requires a lot of money; it does require an inclusive political approach and an awareness of history.

More than 500 years after Columbus arrived, we have an opportunity—really, one last chance—to avoid repeating the catastrophes endured by so many native peoples in the Americas. We have more than enough information. We understand disease and can immunize those who might contact isolated peoples. We can acknowledge that some people don't want to join the global economy. We don't have to commit another genocide. ●

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JASON HOUSTON

Other Isolated Tribes in South America & Asia

The Senitelese (50 to 200 remaining) are believed to have lived on North Sentinel Island (one of the Andaman Islands, 180 miles off the coast of Myanmar) for 60,000 years.

The Korowai (about 3,000 remaining) live in the Papau region of Indonesia, which is mountainous and densely forested. They sleep in tree houses and use stone tools.

The Ayoreo (about 5,000 remaining) are the only uncontacted tribe in South America outside the Amazon. They live in forests in Paraguay and Bolivia.