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**From infant to sage:
mobilizing images of indigenous peoples
in the Brazilian Amazon**

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List of Acronyms

CIMI	Indianist Missionary Council
COICA	Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin
EDF	Environmental Defense Fund
FUNAI	Brazilian National Indian Foundation
IBAMA	Brazil's Federal Environmental Control Agency
INCRA	Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
POLONOROESTE	Integrated Programme for the Development of the Northwest of Brazil
TANs	Transnational advocacy networks
TEK	Traditional ecological knowledge
UNI	Union of Indian Nations
UN WGIP	United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations

Abstract

Prior to the 1980s, indigenous activism in Brazil was primarily a local affair, as indigenous communities sought to defend their traditional lands from the encroachment of cattle ranchers, land speculators and large-scale development projects. However, over the course of the 1980s these local land-use conflicts came to take on major international significance. As concern for the state of the global environment gained momentum in international policy discussions, many indigenous rights activists strategically recast their claims in environmentalist terms. What was previously seen as a conflict over land use or human rights violations was suddenly perceived as a pressing environmental issue—that of deforestation and the subsequent loss of biodiversity. In this way, Indian struggles for self-determination, land rights and cultural survival very rapidly came to be seen by northern audiences as intimately tied to the fate of the rainforest. As a result, a complex network of ‘partnerships,’ ‘alliances’ and information exchange emerged between local Amazonian communities and international environmentalists, which began to challenge the developmentalist policies of international lending institutions and the Brazilian state. These transnational alliances have been instrumental in directing international attention to the plight of indigenous peoples. However, they may ultimately misrepresent the priorities of Amazonian communities.

Keywords

Indigenous rights advocacy, environmentalism, transnational activism, strategic framing, Brazilian Amazon.

Introduction

I suppose I should mention at the outset that the direction, scope and content of this paper differ substantially from what I initially sought to study. My interest in conservation and indigenous peoples began with a perception that ‘Indians’ were being misleadingly represented as natural conservationists and stewards of the forest. This notion of indigenous peoples living in harmony with nature seemed to be, almost invariably, juxtaposed with an equally partial critique of western society (and its epistemological underpinnings) as inherently exploitative and domineering (see, for example, Alcorn, 1993; Mauro and Hardison, 2000. For a critical overview of the indigenous-scientific knowledge debate, see Briggs, 2005; Agrawal, 1995). Faced with mounting pressure to focus my analysis on a particular region of the globe, to develop a working case study or what have you, I decided to investigate some of the academic literature surrounding indigenous peoples and conservation in the Brazilian Amazon. In the process, I discovered that the image of an “ecologically noble savage”—to borrow from Kent Redford—was only one analytical model, or metaphor, used to describe indigenous peoples. The Amazon, it seems, has long been the subject of speculation and intrigue.

What follows is an account of indigenous activism in Brazil since the 1960s. I contend that prior to the 1980s, indigenous activism in Brazil was primarily a local affair, as indigenous communities sought to defend their traditional lands from the encroachment of cattle ranchers, land speculators and large-scale development projects. However, over the course of the 1980s these local land-use conflicts came to take on major international significance. As concern for the state of the global environment gained momentum in international policy discussions, many indigenous rights activists strategically recast their claims in environmentalist terms. What was previously seen as a conflict over land use or human rights violations was suddenly perceived as a pressing environmental issue—that of deforestation and the subsequent loss of biodiversity. In this way, Indian struggles for self-determination, land rights and cultural survival very rapidly came to be seen by northern audiences as intimately tied to the fate of the rainforest. As a result, a complex network of ‘partnerships,’ ‘alliances’ and information exchange emerged between local Amazonian communities and international environmentalists, which began to challenge the developmentalist policies of international lending institutions and the Brazilian state.

In many ways, these transnational alliances have been instrumental in directing international attention to the plight of indigenous peoples. They have also provided Indian activists with a variety of new tactics, resources and opportunities to voice and pursue their demands. At the same time, many of these international linkages appear to hinge on very particular conceptions of Amazonian Indians—conceptions that may not be entirely reflective of realities on the ground. Do indigenous communities invariably act to preserve biological diversity? Has such an environmentalist frame served Brazil’s Indians well? Are there contradictions and pitfalls in this type of strategic framing? In seeking to answer these questions, the following analysis develops

an understanding of indigenous activism as an increasingly transnational phenomenon in which the construction of images and meanings has come to play a central role. Chapter One outlines the analytical framework used to interpret the rise of transnational indigenous activism and the movement (within the movement) towards a more environmentalist perspective. Central to my reading of indigenous activism in Brazil is Keck and Sikkink's notion of *transnational advocacy networks*, and Snow and Benford's work on *collective action frames*. In Chapter Two I outline the situation facing many of Brazil's indigenous peoples during the 1960s and 1970s. I briefly explain how the developmentalist policies of the Brazilian government, designed to 'open-up' the Amazon, led to conflicts between a growing influx of settlers and the region's traditional inhabitants. Chapter Three then examines the rise of transnational Indian activism, with a particular focus on Indian 'eco-politics.' To be sure, Indian rights activists had been active internationally prior to the 1980s, and many have continued to frame their struggles in terms of anti-discrimination, self-determination and human rights. However, the linkage with international environmentalists provided Brazilian Indians with unprecedented access to international audiences and policy-makers. It is this indigenous-environmentalist alliance on which my analysis is centered. Finally, in Chapter Four I assess the success of such partnerships with a view to what they have achieved and where the indigenous rights movement is headed.

I conclude that while mobilizing images of 'rainforest guardians' have become a powerful symbolic resource for indigenous rights advocacy, they may ultimately misrepresent the priorities of Amazonian communities. This discrepancy between representation and reality can have adverse ramifications, especially when indigenous peoples fail to meet outside expectations. By exploring these and other paradoxes, my research aims to contribute to a growing body of literature on transnational activism, and to dismantle some of the more damaging misconceptions of the Amazon and its peoples. The findings outlined below raise important questions regarding representation and the issue of who speaks for whom.

Chapter 1

Transnational activism and issue framing

The introductory sentence to a frequently cited article by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1999) is so succinctly phrased that it merits reprinting here. The authors state, “World politics at the end of the twentieth century involves, alongside states, many non-state actors who interact with each other, with states, and with international organizations” (p.89). The assertion, no doubt familiar to students of international relations, reflects a growing sentiment regarding the supremacy of the state: long considered to be the primary actor in international politics, the state no longer appears to have a monopoly over power exercised in the international political arena. The dramatic rise in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational social movement activity during the 1990s has accentuated these claims, leading many observers to speak of a ‘wavering’ of the state (Rosenau, 1988; Brysk, 2000). As Alison Brysk (2000) notes, “The centrality of the state in world politics has been weakened by new technologies, transborder issues (such as pollution), a relative decline in state capabilities, and rising levels of citizen awareness and activism” (p.12).

One of the areas in which states appear to be losing ground is in the control of information and ideas. Citizens across borders receive information from an increasing array of sources, ranging from global media conglomerates to first- and second-hand experiences garnered through travel, tourism and communication networks. In this regard, non-state actors like NGOs and social movement organizations (SMOs) have become important players in international and domestic politics. Using images, models and facts, social movement activists can disseminate powerful new ideas to various publics. In this context, the notion of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) has gained considerable currency.

1.1 Transnational advocacy networks

According to Keck and Sikkink (1999), “*A transnational advocacy network includes those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services*” (p.89). These actors include, among others, international and domestic NGOs, local social movements, foundations, churches, intellectuals, the media, branches of government or intergovernmental organizations. Although network activists may participate simultaneously in domestic and international politics, the term *transnational* highlights the international dimension of struggle. TANs connect individuals from various countries, building “links among actors in civil societies, states and international organizations” (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p.89). For Keck and Sikkink, these linkages are structured in *networks*—a form of organization that is characterized by “voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange” (Ibid, p.91). To be sure, transnational networks are inescapably framed by broader power relationships;

north-south cleavages and imbalances between donors and recipients are issues that warrant careful consideration. However, activists are said to voluntarily participate in TANs to the extent that they perceive opportunities for mutual learning and benefits. In this sense, the concept of network is useful in that it “stresses the fluid and open relations among committed and knowledgeable actors working in specialized issue areas” (Ibid, p.91). Finally, the term *advocacy* denotes the act of pleading or supporting a given cause. In this respect, TANs are distinguishable from other networks; they are organized to “promote causes, principled ideas and norms, and often involve individuals advocating policy changes that cannot be easily linked to their ‘interests’” (Ibid, p.91).

Transnational networks function in ways that are similar to those of other political groups. That is, they work to influence the actions, policies or orientation of target actors, usually states or international institutions. However, “because they are not powerful in the traditional sense of the word, they must use the power of their information, ideas and strategies to alter the information and value context within which states make policies” (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p.95). A defining aspect of TANs is their ability to generate and disseminate information—what Keck and Sikkink have labeled *information politics*. Using telephones, e-mail and a variety of publication types, activist networks mobilize information quickly and strategically in order “to help create new issues and categories and to persuade, pressure, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments” (Keck & Sikkink, 2007, p.370). In the process, they provide ‘alternative’ information and give voice to sources that may otherwise not have been heard (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p.95).

Another tactic employed by network actors is what Keck and Sikkink refer to as *symbolic politics*, or “the ability to call upon symbols, actions or stories that make sense of a situation or claim for an audience that is frequently far away” (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p.95). In 1992, for example, the quincentenary of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas served as a powerful symbol around which indigenous rights activists mobilized to reshape public perceptions. Their campaign of ‘500 years of resistance’ contrasted sharply with the mainstream discourses celebrating the arrival of Columbus. A third type of network tactic involves *accountability politics*, whereby network actors oblige more powerful actors to follow through on policies or principles they have formally endorsed (Ibid, p.95). Accountability politics often entails exposing “the distance between discourse and practice,” which can be embarrassing to governments concerned with public perceptions at home and abroad (Ibid, p.98).

The tactics described above frequently overlap, and often occur alongside a fourth strategy employed by networks—that of leveraging. *Leverage politics* refers to “the ability to call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network are unlikely to have influence” (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p.95). These tactics often occur when a state is unresponsive to the demands of domestic groups. In these circumstances, local activists might reach out through networks to articulate their claims in international fora, or seek the aid of powerful states. The subsequent pressuring can involve material leverage, such as threatening to halt a country’s aid flows in light of large-scale human rights abuses, or it may involve a form of moral leverage

whereby activists work to ‘mobilize shame.’ As Keck and Sikkink note, negative international scrutiny often acts as a powerful deterrent to states concerned with international prestige (Ibid, p.97). In short, transnational linkages can provide activists in developing countries with powerful allies abroad. When the links between state and domestic actors are severed, networks create a form of triangulation, or ‘boomerang’ pattern of influence, wherein “international contacts can ‘amplify’ the demands of domestic groups, pry open space for new issues, and then echo these demands back into the domestic arena” (Ibid, p.93).

1.2 Collective action frames

Among the strategies employed by network activists, the construction of cognitive frames plays a central role. Broadly defined, ‘framing’ can be considered a form of “meaning construction” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.611). The term was introduced by Erving Goffman to denote ““schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large. Frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.614). The concept gained currency in the social movement literature during the mid-1980s, largely as a result of work done by David Snow and colleagues. Responding to perceived shortcomings in social movement thinking, Snow and his associates developed the concept of framing to theorize the role of interpretation and “other ideational elements,” which they claimed were central in understanding the shape and character of social movement organization (Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford, 1986, p.465). The authors argued that structural variables, such as political opportunities, were not sufficient in accounting for the rise and fall of cycles of protest. They proposed that movement participation also be analyzed in terms of ‘meaning work’—that is, “the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.613). In short, Snow and his colleagues were interested in how events, experiences and grievances came to be interpreted and articulated by movement participants.

A central tenet advanced by Snow and his colleagues is that the meanings and ideas that circulate within social movement organizations are not simply given, but rather the product of ‘signifying agents,’ who “actively engage in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.613). From this perspective, framing implies both agency, in the sense that something is being done, and process, in the sense that new frames emerge, challenge and can come to replace existing ones. The product of this dynamic process is what Benford and Snow (2000) refer to as ‘collective action frames’ (p.614). As a form of framing, collective action frames work to simplify and make sense of the world, but they do so in ways intended to mobilize and garner support for a given cause. This orientation toward political action is what distinguishes collective action frames from the more interpretive definition outlined above: “collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that

inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (p.614). The construction of collective action frames is thus a core activity undertaken by movement organizers seeking potential recruits.

According to Benford and Snow (2000), collective action frames perform three core framing tasks. These include: (1) diagnostic framing, (2) prognostic framing, and (3) motivational framing. In the first instance, collective action frames work to identify a situation or series of events as unjust, intolerable and in need of change. In identifying a problematic situation, movement activists must also specify a sense of blame or causality. This is done “by identifying culpable agents, be they individuals or collective processes or structures” (Snow and Benford, 1992, p.137). Prognosis is then aimed at resolving the problematic situation. Here, movement activists outline a proposed course of action, as well as a corresponding sense of responsibility for carrying out that action. Finally, the emerging collective action frame should provide a justification or rationale for engaging in collective action. This justification may be of material, moral or emotional appeal, but the purpose is to ‘prod people to action’ (Morgan, 2004, p.484). By pursuing these core framing tasks, movement activists work to foster consensus and a shared understanding of the nature of the problem, and to incite people to take ameliorative action.

Although the effectiveness of a collective action frame is influenced by several variables, the concept of frame resonance merits particular attention. Frames are deemed to ‘resonate’ within a particular audience if they ‘fit’ closely with the beliefs, values and ideas of the targets of mobilization. Frame resonance also depends on the credibility of the claims that are being made and those that are making them. These two factors—credibility and salience—determine the effect of an organization’s interpretive work on broader public understandings. The key point worth noting, then, is that social movement actors—especially those working transnationally—do not simply interpret events as they perceive them. To be sure, many strive to represent events and occurrences accurately; indeed, the credibility of their claims often depends on such accuracy. However, in order to ensure that these claims resonate within a broader public or policy circle, network activists must also interpret events in a way that will make sense and appear compelling to their target audiences. It is this ‘fitting’ process that makes the work of transnational activists such an interesting subject of analysis. In order to secure favourable institutional venues or to push the policy ball forward, movement activists might be tempted to extend the boundaries of their current framework or to redefine their work entirely from the standpoint of another framework—what Snow et al. (1986) refer to as frame extension and frame transformation, respectively. In these circumstances, activities, events and biographies can come to be seen by movement participants as “something quite else” (qtd. in Snow et al., 1986, p.474).

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter has proceeded from the assumption that social movement activity is increasingly transnational—that is, occurring beyond state boundaries. I

used the idea of *transnational advocacy networks* to conceptualize how these activities are structured, and to outline various tactics employed by social movement activists. I then proceeded to elaborate the concept of *collective action frames*. Following David Snow and associates, I argued that this type of interpretive work is often crucial to the emergence and course of social movement organization. Network activists consciously and strategically produce collective action frames—often in innovative ways—in order to organize and generate information, and to bring issues to public agendas (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p.95). In the following chapters, these themes are elaborated in the context of indigenous rights struggles. By examining certain aspects of the indigenous peoples movement in Brazil, I hope to demonstrate some of the benefits and paradoxes of transnational networking and issue framing.

Chapter 2

The emergence of Indian rights activism in Brazil

This chapter aims to provide a general overview of the ideological and policy contexts in which indigenous communities in Brazil began to mobilize and articulate grievances. I begin by examining certain presuppositions and ideas of indigeneity, which—until the 1980s—were prevalent among Brazilian policy makers, international development practitioners and certain academics studying the Amazon and its peoples. I then outline the development ambitions of the Brazilian state beginning in the late 1960s. During this period, government policy catalyzed mass migration into parts of the Amazon that were traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples. Finally, I sketch the reaction of certain indigenous communities as they came into conflict with the growing influx of squatters and land grabbers. Recognizing the inherent complexities in labelling a given population as ‘indigenous’ (see Purcell, 1998; Kuper, 2003), I use the terms ‘indigenous’ and ‘Indian’ interchangeably to refer to people that are descendants of the original inhabitants of the Americas. These peoples “have a historical connection with pre-Conquest populations, identify themselves and are recognized by their communities as indigenous, (often) speak non-Latin languages, and are (usually) socially marginalized” (Brysk, 2000, p.5; see also Muehlebach, 2001, p.421). At the same time, it should be noted that many ‘traditional’ inhabitants of the Amazon are “the descendants of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans who mixed reproductively and culturally during colonial times” (Pace, 2004, p.233). These ‘traditional’ peasantries were engaged in extractive and subsistence activities long before the 1960s, and while not indigenous in the sense described above, they often share similar histories of discrimination and abuse.

2.1 Conceptions of indigenous peoples

Due to the nature of their discipline, anthropologists were often among the first ‘outsiders’ to produce early accounts of indigenous peoples. Although the discipline has undergone considerable transformation—many anthropologists now espouse an explicit commitment to indigenous peoples and their struggles (see Ramos, 2000)—early reflections of indigenous peoples were strongly influenced by theories of cultural and social evolutionism. Trevor Purcell (1998) states,

In the early days of the discipline, most anthropologists followed on the heels of colonial administrators, missionaries and diverse adventurers, most from Europe. Convinced of their own position at the very top of the “chain of being,” Europeans (and those of European heritage) saw the rest of the world, including those whom they studied, as evolutionary “infants” and treated them accordingly” (p.264-265).

Indigenous peoples were viewed as “backward, inferior races” that nevertheless could, through normal evolutionary processes, progress and develop toward the “modern” conditions of Western society, seen as the ideal” (Wright, 1988, p.368; see also Barbosa, 2000, p.103). In this context, anthropological accounts of indigenous societies largely served the interests of colonial and postcolonial administrators. Forced acculturation was the policy prescription of the day, its primary objective being to replace indigenous cultural traits with those of the dominant culture. It was believed that through education (or outright military conquest), indigenous peoples would inevitably become integrated into the national society (Ibid, p.368-369; see also Muehlebach, 2001, p.421).

Despite subsequent shifts in the discipline, anthropology remained markedly ethnocentric well into the mid-twentieth century (see Wright, 1999, for a detailed overview). Methodologies and analytical lens varied, but indigenous peoples were rarely presented as capable of articulating their own problems or entitled to determine their own futures (Ibid, p.369-370). These notions of cultural superiority also came to dominate the nascent field of international development. During the 1950s and 1960s, theorists and practitioners were heavily influenced by the prevailing ideology of modernization theory, which viewed traditional values and social structures as impediments to material development. Modernization theorists claimed that in order for developing countries to graduate into the industrial era, these countries must abandon anachronistic beliefs and social conventions. Western society was presented as the role model; its commitment to secularism, democratization and individualism was touted as a universal good. Such ethnocentrism provided the cultural backdrop for Walt Rostow’s (1960) highly influential *Stages of Economic Growth*, in which countries were classified according to their progress along one seemingly unchanging trajectory. The fifth and final stage of Rostow’s development process was tellingly labeled the ‘Age of High Mass Consumption.’

2.2 Integrationist policies of the Brazilian state

Such was the ideological context in which Brazil embarked on a series of development projects designed to integrate the Amazon into its national development plans. As Anthony Hall (2000) notes, “During the 1970s, traditional Amazonian populations were portrayed by government policy-makers as the anachronistic and primitive vestiges of pre-industrial society that constituted an obstacle to growth and had to be modernised or removed as quickly as possible” (p.108; see also Davis and Wali, 1994, p.486; Jackson and Warren, 2005, p.551; Pace, 2004, p.240). Government officials operated under the assumption that regional and national economic growth would be stimulated by replacing the ‘primitive’ technologies of indigenous populations with modern “commercial enterprises such as cattle ranching, logging, mining and large-scale agriculture” (Hall, 2000, p.99; see also Garfield, 2001, p.138). These plans were elaborated in national development strategies such as Operation Amazon (1966) and the National Integration Plan (1970), which “aimed at increasing the region’s population and forcing the pulse of its

economy” (Foresta, 1992, p.131; see also Barbosa, 2000, p.30; Davis, 1977, p.38; Kolk, 1996, p.74). In order to facilitate such a transition, Brazil’s military junta offered numerous incentives for investors. These include, among others, investment in infrastructure, land allocation and general tax exemptions, each of which are discussed below.

Infrastructure development

The construction of highways and airstrips has evidently been an important factor in breaking Amazonia’s relative isolation. One of the first large projects to be undertaken in the region was the construction of the Trans-Amazon Highway (BR-230), “a 4,960 km road connecting the Northeast of Brazil to the Brazilian-Peruvian border” (Barbosa, 2000, p.50). Inaugurated in 1972, the road network cut through remote rain forest, making previously inaccessible terrain open to ‘development.’ Two similar projects had been initiated during the 1960s: “the BR-010, or Belém-Brasília Highway, running north to south on the eastern edge of the Amazon; and the BR-364 Highway, connecting the city of Cuiabá in Mato Grosso with the town of Porto Velho in Rondônia” (Davis, 1977, p.62; see figure 2.1). These types of infrastructural projects accelerate migration in a variety of ways. According to Philip Fearnside (1987), the construction of highways creates a “powerful positive feedback loop with population growth: roads facilitate the entry of migrants who stake out claims beyond the limits of the existing road network, thereby creating political pressure to build still more roads to extend the network out to their claims” (p.216-217). In the same vein, road building lowers the cost of transportation between Amazonia and the rest of the country. As connections to southern markets improve, the economic barriers said to characterize the frontier—high input costs and limited interregional trade—are effectively mitigated (Cattaneo, 2002, p.2). The situation is often compounded by rising land values, which further increase “the attraction of the region for large-scale investors” (Schmink, 1982, p.344). Highway construction therefore unleashes a wave of fiscal incentives to extend extractive activity into the Amazonian interior.

Land allocation

Until fairly recently, most of the land in Brazil’s Legal Amazon was publicly owned by federal or state governments (Fearnside, 2001, p.1362). In theory, there are a variety of legal mechanisms by which public land can pass to private ownership. During the 1970s, colonists could purchase small plots of lands in government-sponsored settlement areas; large private owners could also purchase land through sealed tenders. In practice, however, most land in Amazonia is converted to private ownership through illegal invasions by land grabbers, both small and large, “who use forged deeds, often in combination with bribery, threats and violence, to obtain areas illicitly” (Ibid, p.1364). In order to secure their claims to land, newcomers often make use of a right known as *direito de posse*, which states that

a squatter, or *posseiro*, who lives on unclaimed public land (*terra devoluta*) and has used it ‘effectively’ for at least one year and one day, has a

usufruct right over 100 hectares. If the *posseiro* fulfills the condition of living on and effectively using the land...for more than five years, he or she has the right to acquire a title. Land can also be acquired by squatting on private land for a time without being challenged by the owner (Binswanger, 1991, p.823).

By the time roads are constructed, this process of squatting is typically well underway—with most federal or state land in the vicinity claimed by an individual or corporation (Ibid, p.822). The role of the government then becomes one of ‘legalization’ or ‘regularization,’ a process by which the holders of claims are given secure legal titles. Small farmers tend to have the most difficulty in finding land for squatting because they do not have the capital to build private access roads into the forest. Their activities are therefore concentrated around public roads, which are used to market products and access health and education facilities. Consequently, large portions of public land tend to be allocated to individually owned ranches or to large corporations with the capacity to stake claims further from the frontier (Ibid, p.823).

Figure 2.1 Road networks in the Brazilian Amazon



Source: Davis, S. (1977). *Victims of the Miracle: Development and the Indians of Brazil*.

General tax policies

According to Andrea Cattaneo (2002), credit and fiscal subsidies to agriculture have acted as important “push factors in the migration process” (p.3). One of the areas in which this is most apparent is income tax policy. Up until the 1990s, when fiscal incentives for agricultural were ‘officially’ withdrawn, agricultural income was taxed at substantially lower rates than nonagricultural income. Cattaneo observes a virtual tax exemption, noting a 1.5-6.0 percent tax rate on agricultural income compared to a 35-45 percent corporate tax rate in manufacturing and services (Ibid, p.3). Similarly, Binswanger (1991) argues that “[c]orporations and individuals can exclude up to 80% and 90%, respectively, of agricultural profits from their taxable income by using a variety of special provisions of the income tax code” (p.821-822). These policies effectively convert agriculture into a tax shelter, thereby encouraging private and corporate investors to undertake agricultural projects, “even though the projects have a lower economic rate of return than nonagricultural projects” (Ibid, p.822). Demand for land subsequently increases, as investors and corporations compete aggressively to expand agricultural activity in established settlements and along the frontier.

Figure 2.2 Main migratory flows in Brazil



Source: Brandford, S., and Glock, O. (1985). *The Last Frontier: Fighting Over Land in the Amazon*.

Given the strong incentives to migrate and invest in Amazonia, it is not surprising that the region experienced substantial migration during the 1970s. Colonization schemes were well-publicized and attracted large numbers of migrants from the northeast and south. The process was overseen by a series of government agencies, including the Institute for Colonization and Agricultural Reform (INCRA). During the early 1970s, INCRA was responsible for the relocation of landless peasants to government-sponsored settlements in the region. As noted above, migrants were given the opportunity to purchase small plots of land in colonization areas. Under the National Integration Plan, 10 km on each side of the Transamazon Highway were reserved for this purpose (Barbosa, 2000, p.38; Davis, 1977, p.39). In the end, however, INCRA projects only absorbed a small proportion of migrants; the remainder sought out work in towns along the highway or staked out independent land claims along the frontier (Schmink, 1982, p.344). By the mid-1970s, the allocation of land to 'ignorant' peasants was seen as counter-intuitive. Government policy subsequently shifted in favour of big business and large land allocations, although a growing number of landless peasants still continued to migrate to the region (Barbosa, 2000, p.41; Kolk, 1996, p.75). The result of these mixed policies was a growing influx of settlers, both rich and poor, competing for land along the frontier. By 1980, the total rural population of the Legal Amazon had risen to 1,047,912 people—compared to only 164,669 a decade earlier (Ibid, p.41).

2.3 Effects on indigenous peoples and the environment

The development projects of the 1960s and 1970s had severe human and environmental consequences. The construction of highways and road networks cleared vast tracts of primary rainforest. This process was accelerated by the rules of land allocation and general tax incentives, which encouraged settlers to convert their newly acquired lands into pasture and agriculture. Deforestation came to be the primary means by which settlers established their claims to land. In the eyes of government officials, it was considered an 'improvement,' which demonstrated 'effective' use of the land (Fearnside, 2005, p.685; Binswanger, 1991, p.827). Properties that were not cleared risked being seen as idle, and were thus open to invasion by landless peasants. The situation was such that by 1978 an area of 152,200 km² of Amazonian forests had been cleared. By 1988, the cleared area had increased to 377,500 km²—with annual deforestation rates comparable to the size of Belgium (Barbosa, 2000, p.59-60; Fearnside, 2005, p.681).

The human cost of government projects was felt most acutely by indigenous peoples. Public roads were frequently constructed in areas that were occupied by indigenous communities, many of which had little experience with non-Indians. The influx of highway workers and colonists introduced new diseases to these areas, often with devastating consequences for indigenous communities. Ramos (2000) describes the decimation of the Yanomami following the construction of the Perimetral Norte highway in the early 1970s:

Within four years, workers in poor health conditions, gold prospectors (*garimpeiros*) who were totally unprepared to interact with monolingual Indians, and unscrupulous entrepreneurs did more harm to the Yanomami of the Ajarani and Catrimani River valleys than anything in the Indians' living memory, including intergroup warfare. By 1975, the first year of road construction, nearly one-quarter of the Ajarani dwellers had died of contagious diseases. One year later, half of the population of another village cluster was killed by a measles epidemic (p.175; see also Barbosa, 2000, p.61; Davis, 1977; and Branford and Glock, 1985, p.203-224, for similar accounts of the Nambikwara, Parakanã, Txukahamae, Arara and Gabião tribes).

At the same time, large landowners frequently invaded Indian territories, ignoring the latter's ancestral claims and using hired gunmen to intimidate or eliminate opposition. According to Branford and Glock (1985), local landowners and politicians harboured anti-Indian sentiments that bordered on irrational: "It seemed to us that many of the landowners hated the Indians, not just for the economic threat they represented, but also because they belonged to a different culture that the landowners did not understand" (p.181). Accounts provided by the authors evoke scenes from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In 1976, for example, a group of landowners from the town of Barra de Garças invaded a Bororo reserve and killed an Indian in cold blood. Upon their return, the party was greeted with celebrations that "stretched far into the night" (Ibid, p.182). Indian contact in Amazonia thus came to be characterized by violence, disease and deforestation. The seriousness of these claims cannot be understated. By the 1970s, many indigenous tribes were living in miserable conditions and facing extinction.

Amidst the turmoil, Brazil's military government maintained a policy of 'pacification.' In the early 1970s, agents from the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) were sent to contact potentially hostile tribes that lived along the Transamazon Highway. The agents were expected to do two things: "(1) insure that Indians did not serve as an obstacle to the rapid occupation of the Amazon Basin; and (2) provide highway workers with protection against a supposed Indian threat" (Davis, 1977, p.58). Around the same time, the military regime introduced a new Indian Statute, which empowered government officials to physically relocate Indian tribes that threatened national security or the country's development ambitions. Communities occupying coveted lands would simply be resettled in other areas. The message was clear: Indians would not be permitted to stand in the way of Brazil's development. The country was at the apex of economic expansion, with Gross Domestic Product growing at average annual rates of 11.5 percent. Domestic and international commentators spoke enthusiastically about a development 'miracle' and the prospects of a new superpower by the year 2000 (Barbosa, 2000, p.43). In this atmosphere, calls for social and environmental justice largely went unheeded.

Indian resistance

Initially, the development projects of the 1960s and 1970s were met with the same forms of Indian resistance that had characterized earlier periods of colonial expansion. Indigenous communities either defended their territories through armed confrontation, or they moved “as far as possible from non-Indians, deeper into the forest” (Barbosa, 2000, p.104). Using ‘bows and arrows,’ many Amazonian tribes succeeded in temporarily halting road construction. For example, in the late 1960s the Waimiri-Atroari of Northern Brazil attacked and killed dozens of highway workers near Manaus. The situation was so severe that the military considered using tear gas and machine guns in retaliation (Ibid, p.104). Similarly, the Xavante Indians in Mato Grosso frequently used violence to achieve their goals. Notorious for their tough stance with outsiders, Xavante warriors succeeded in removing cattle companies from their lands as early as 1975. Their message was unequivocal: “Move off our lands” (Branford and Glock, 1985, p.197). Many other tribes followed the Xavante example. In the end, however, most were unable to halt the invasion of their territories. Indigenous peoples were unorganized and scattered over a large area; their resistance was entirely parochial (Barbosa, 2000, p.104). In contrast, the colonizers had guns, infectious diseases and the support of Brazil’s armed forces.

The situation changed slightly over the course of the 1970s. In 1974, delegates from several indigenous communities attended an assembly of Indian leaders organized by the Indianist Missionary Council (CIMI). At the time, CIMI believed that if Indians could understand the common nature of their problems, “they could start organising their own fight for survival” (Branford and Glock, 1985, p.194). The assembly was successful in that it helped different indigenous communities get to know one another. According to CIMI bulletins, participants were fascinated to learn of other tribes and their experiences with the white man. Common grievances included: “the danger that the white man’s cattle ranches represented for their lands; the sickness brought by the white man; the upheavals caused by road construction; the inadequacy of the help provided by Funai...[and] the general characteristics of the process of eviction that they were suffering all over Brazil” (Ibid, p.194). These concerns resurfaced during the second assembly of Indian leaders in May 1975. The Indians present all expressed dissatisfaction with FUNAI and the unwillingness of government officials to demarcate Indian lands. CIMI continued to provide a venue for these meetings, and by the end of the decade delegates from indigenous communities had met about a dozen times (Ibid, p.194).

In the early 1980s, indigenous communities began to organize and assert their collective rights. In June 1980, a group of 40 Indians from 12 different tribes occupied FUNAI’s headquarters in Brasília. The activists demanded the dismissal of several high-ranking personnel and a radical reorganization of FUNAI. In May 1981, 73 leaders from 32 tribes founded the Union of Indian Nations (UNI) despite strong disapproval by FUNAI. UNI’s mission was “to bring together all Indians who are fighting for an Indian policy which will benefit the Indians themselves” (qtd. in Branford and Glock, 1985, p.198). One year later, the first national congress of Indian peoples took place

in Brasília. Over the next few years, Brazil's indigenous peoples became increasingly irritated by the government's Indian policy and FUNAI's failure to follow through on its promises. In 1984, a group of Kayapó Indians hijacked a ferry crossing the Xingu River. They explained that they would only allow traffic to resume if the president of FUNAI "came to the Xingu Park and sorted out their land problem" (Ibid, p.201). When the president refused, Kayapó warriors kidnapped three FUNAI employees, "threatening to kill them unless Funai accepted their demands for a larger area of land and for a new president of Funai" (Ibid, p.201). After several days of negotiation, the Kayapó were granted most of their demands: the president of FUNAI was dismissed and the tribe received a new tract of land. Similar confrontations have been documented in the states of Maranhão and Roraima (see Barbosa, 2000, p.104).

Whether these types of strategies were effective is hard to say. To be sure, a number of indigenous communities managed to gain legal recognition of their territories. However, these concessions were often just a fraction of their traditional lands, inadequate in both size and calibre (Garfield, 2001, p.158; Brysk, 2000, p.7). More importantly, the demarcation of Indian Reserves did not preclude invasion by cattle ranchers, gold miners and other land grabbers. Cattle ranchers continued to clear plots of land in Indian territories, and *garimpeiros* continued to pan for gold and diamonds. The Brazilian government did little to eliminate the incentives for investment in Amazonia. In fact, in 1980 it announced an ambitious new project called the Integrated Programme for the Development of the Northwest of Brazil (POLONOROESTE). Partly funded by the World Bank, the objective of the programme "was to bring into productive use about 25 million hectares of fertile land along Brazil's frontier with Bolivia" (Branford and Glock, 1985, p.206). The project called for the asphaltting of the Cuiabá-Porto Velho highway and the construction of "a further 3,500 kilometres of feeder roads to break the isolation of the region" (Ibid, p.206). Thousands of settlers flooded the region long before government authority or support services could be established. Previous commitments to reserve areas were either rescinded or poorly enforced. Not surprisingly, the indigenous inhabitants of the region found themselves facing a new round of violence and disease—not to mention an explosion of deforestation well beyond the project's 'area of influence.' Government policy in Amazonia thus continued to encourage invasion and degradation of Indian lands, despite Indian resistance at the local and national levels.

2.4 Conclusion

What does this chronology tell us about contemporary Indian activism in Brazil? I have attempted to show that Brazil's indigenous movement emerged in response to a set of government policies designed to populate and develop the Amazon basin. These policies were based on ethnocentric assumptions of indigeneity, and were inimical to the wellbeing of indigenous peoples. Indian responses were initially quite parochial; however, there appears to be commonalities between these discrete acts of resistance. First and foremost,

Brazil's indigenous communities mobilized to defend their territory. In this sense, their actions were geared primarily toward removing unwanted intruders from their lands. To this end, indigenous communities either confronted the intruders themselves, or they tried to pressure government officials into clearly demarcating Indian reservations. Although Indians experienced widespread deforestation and degradation of their lands, the movement's initial goals were not explicitly environmentalist. In the following chapter, I describe how Indian resistance in Brazil has evolved as a result of internationalization. I will focus particularly on the Indian-environmentalist alliance that emerged in the 1980s.

Chapter 3

The internationalization of Indian resistance

3.1 Beginnings of an international movement

The lack of domestic support for indigenous issues led many Indian leaders to seek international allies. I have already mentioned in Chapter 1 that these tactics are not atypical of new social movement activity. As Brysk (1996) notes, “Many social movements draw on international resources, alliances, or opportunities; indigenous advocacy differs in degree but not kind from other social movements” (p.42). During the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of international actors had already begun to mobilize on behalf of indigenous peoples. In this sense, it would be inaccurate to claim that the plight of Amazonian Indians was entirely unknown to the international community prior to the 1980s. In 1968, for example, international human rights activists founded the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) in response to the “genocide of Indians in the Amazon” (IWGIA, 2009). Similarly, in 1969, Survival International was founded “after an article by Norman Lewis in the UK’s Sunday Times highlighted the massacres, land thefts and genocide taking place in Brazilian Amazonia” (Survival International, 2009). These and other pro-indigenous organizations sent fact-gathering commissions to the interior regions of Brazil, which helped to shed light on the deleterious situation facing Amazonian Indians (Davis, 1977, p.16). Indigenous advocacy groups such as Cultural Survival also provided support for the development of domestic Indian rights groups and Indian federations throughout Latin America (Brysk, 1996, p.44). These linkages helped indigenous peoples to publicize their grievances internationally, and marked the beginning of an international campaign in support of indigenous peoples (Maybury-Lewis, 2003, p.327-328).

At the same time, a number of international conferences were organized to address the condition of indigenous peoples in Latin America. In 1971, anthropologists of the Americas gathered in Barbados, producing The Declaration of Barbados for the Liberation of the Indians. The Declaration “called on states, religious missions, and social scientists...to take action in halting aggression against the Indians of the Americas, and to contribute significantly to the process of Indian liberation” (Wright, 1988, p.373). According to Brysk (1996), the Conference was a watershed in the international indigenous-peoples movement. It raised the notion of indigenous self-determination and called on international actors to take a political stand in support of endangered cultures (p.44; see also Brysk, 2000, p.18). These issues eventually began to circulate within the United Nations. In 1977, an unprecedented number of indigenous leaders attended the International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas. The Conference provided UN and state officials with first-hand testimonies from indigenous spokespersons, and made recommendations to

“protect indigenous peoples from abuses at the hands of nation-states” (Morgan, 2007, p.278). Activists, UN workers and state officials met again in 1981 for the UN Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Land, which led to similar recommendations in support of indigenous peoples. These efforts culminated in 1982 with the establishment of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UN WGIP). According to Morgan (2007), UN WGIP provided a more permanent arena in which indigenous representatives from diverse countries could meet regularly, discuss their common grievances and articulate “their own conceptions of their rights” (p.278). International gatherings thus played an important role in strengthening the emerging indigenous-peoples movement. Conferences provided a physical space in which indigenous leaders could make new contacts and consolidate existing ones. They also helped to reinforce an understanding among indigenous peoples that the problems they faced were shared (Ibid, p.277-278).

Over the course of the 1980s, discourses within the indigenous-peoples movement came to focus on the concept of self-determination and autonomy (Brysk, 2000, p.59). Brysk (1996) states, “as Indians themselves participated more in the movement, situational goals coalesced around the concept of self-determination. Land rights and access to natural resources were usually a prominent theme, as was relief from human rights abuses” (p.41). Evidently, self-determination can have different meanings for different peoples. For some, the concept refers to autonomy within a broader nation-state; for others, it amounts to full sovereign independence (Wright, 1988, p.381). However, for most indigenous communities, self-determination is not about secession. Maybury-Lewis (2003) asserts, “Indigenous peoples universally desire autonomy, which, in the vast majority of cases, means that they wish to exercise local control over their own affairs within the framework of the states in which they live” (Maybury-Lewis, 2003, p.331). In this sense, self-determination is “usually interpreted as the collective empowerment of peoples sufficient to enable effective management of development, cultural contact, and political representation” (Brysk, 2000, p.59). Similarly, cultural survival should not be interpreted as the preservation of a static, precontact indigenous culture, but rather “the right of indigenous peoples to negotiate on fair terms their engagement with the larger world” (Rodriguez-Garavito and Arena, 2005, p.245; see also Briggs, 2005, p.108).

These goals continued to characterize the indigenous-peoples movement well into the 1990s. In 1995, for example, Van Cott described the aspirations of Latin American indigenous movements as “self-determination and autonomy, with an emphasis on cultural distinctiveness; political reforms that involve a restructuring of the state; territorial rights and access to natural resources, including control over economic development; and reforms of military and police powers over indigenous peoples” (qtd. in Jackson and Warren, 2005, p.550). If we compare this list of demands to the chronology of events in the preceding chapter, there is an undeniable continuity. As noted above, Indian activism in Brazil emerged as a result of widespread discrimination and disregard for indigenous cultures. Indians were treated as backward and inferior; their ancestral claims to land were consistently ignored. In this context, calls for self-determination, land rights and cultural recognition

were a logical response to the problems facing indigenous communities. These were moral arguments, based on principles of human rights, ancestral claims to land (“first peoples”) and the rapid disappearance of indigenous cultures, including language.

Interestingly, by 1990, an entirely different set of arguments was developing in support of indigenous peoples. According to Beth Conklin (2002), “these arguments shifted indigenous political discourses “from a politics of morality to a politics that frames morality in a new terminology consisting of the notion of valuable knowledge in the service of biodiversity”” (p.1055; Muchlebach, 2001, p.417-418). This new logic saw indigenous peoples as uniquely situated to preserve their environmental surroundings. Proponents stressed the ‘closeness’ of indigenous peoples to their lands, and managed to produce a compelling narrative of Indians living in harmony with nature ‘since time immemorial.’ In Brazil, Indians were portrayed as important guardians of a rainforest under threat; their way of life was offered as the very antithesis of modern, extractive activity. Thus, indigenous claims to land were no longer seen exclusively within a rights-based framework, but also from the vantage of environmental sustainability. This shift in argumentation can be understood in relation to other developments at the international level, including the rise of global environmentalism, growing concern over deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, and a spate of ethnographic writings on indigenous peoples. These themes are elaborated in the following section. I then examine the ‘eco-Indian’ alliance that emerged between Indian activists and global environmentalists.

3.2 Environmentalism, rainforests and indigenous peoples

In the mid-1980s, concern for the state of the environment became an important issue in international politics (Kolk, 1996, p.15; Barbosa, 2000, p.66; Pieck, 2006, p.312). This is not to say that environmental considerations failed to surface prior to the 1980s—the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment suggests that transborder environmental issues were salient more than a decade earlier. However, over the course of the 1980s, public concern for the declining state the environment was given impetus by two major ecological events: the hole in the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect. As Barbosa (2000) notes,

the ozone layer hole and the greenhouse effect are perceived as truly international problems. It is becoming increasingly understood that they have potentially devastating consequences for everyone on the planet. ...They are problems that alarm governments because of their enormous potential economic and social consequences, e.g., floods, droughts, skin cancer, rising sea levels, etc. ...They have become symbols of the precariousness of the environment (p.66-67).

These and other environmental issues received substantial media coverage, which increased public awareness considerably (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p.128; Barbosa, 2003, p.583).

Consequently, the 1980s saw a sharp rise in membership enrolment in environmental organizations. In the United States, the Natural Resources

Defense Council (NRDC) and the Nature Conservancy grew 2.7 times between 1985 and 1990. Over the same period, World Wildlife Fund-US grew 5.6 times, and membership in Greenpeace more than doubled (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p.128). These organizations took advantage of the media's extensive coverage of environmental issues, building both public and financial support. The larger support base gave many environmental organizations the confidence and resources to participate more forcibly in domestic and international politics. As a result, many groups stepped up their political activity and began to challenge "the prevailing view of development as usual—against the irrationalities of capitalism" (Barbosa, 2000, p.70). In 1983, for example, a group of environmental activists in Washington, D.C., launched a campaign targeting international financial institutions, such as the World Bank. Using a variety of tactics, activists put pressure on large, multilateral development banks that had failed to incorporate environmental considerations into their lending policies (see Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p.135). According to Barbosa (2000), these and other campaigns forced international organizations and governments "to take notice of the harmful impact of development on the environment" (p.70).

The proliferation and politicization of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was by no means limited to the developed world. During the 1980s, many developing countries experienced a 'wave' of democratization, which led to new opportunities for social mobilization. In Latin America, the transition to democracy encouraged the formation of new, grassroots organizations and campaigns geared toward a variety of causes. As Keck and Sikkink (1998) note, "Older conservation organizations were joined by new urban and rural movements with different approaches to the relationship between development goals and their social and environmental consequences" (p.130). In Brazil, the number of environmental NGOs increased from "an estimated 40 organizations in 1980 to an estimated 900 in 1984" (Barbosa, 2003, p.583). Like their northern counterparts, these organizations were dissatisfied with conventional approaches to economic growth. Many espoused alternative conceptions of development, advocating community empowerment and sustainable use of environmental resources. These groups were aided by activists in developed countries, who began to take advantage of new communication technologies and cheaper air travel in order to facilitate international networking. Some of the larger environmental NGOs established subsidiaries in developing countries; others worked via partnerships with Southern activists (Barbosa, 2000, p.69). By the mid-1980s, a transnational network of environmental activists was thus beginning to take shape (Ibid, p.132).

According to Ans Kolk (1996), "One of the areas in which this politicisation and internationalisation of the environmental debate could be noted was forests, and tropical rainforests in particular" (p.15-16). The term 'tropical deforestation' emerged in the early 1970s. One of the first organizations to address the issue was the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which published a bulletin in 1972 expressing concern over the Brazilian government's decision to accelerate development projects in the Amazon Basin. Concern grew rapidly over the course of the

1970s, and by the 1980s, a variety of NGOs and international organizations had mounted campaigns around the issue of tropical forests. In 1985, for example, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced the International Year of the Forest, and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) “launched a highly successful fund-raising campaign around tropical forests” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p.135). These organizations promulgated the idea that some of the world’s most unique ecosystems were undergoing irreparable damage. Conservationists stressed the importance of biological diversity, arguing that tropical rainforests contained “innumerable herbs, plants and animals” and were reservoirs “for genetic material, new crops and medicine” (Kolk, 1996, p.61). Without adequate protection, conservationists feared that the biodiversity of these regions would be severely compromised. Links were also established between deforestation and global warming. Large standing forests were found to remove significant amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In this way, forests also came to be seen as important regulators of the global climate.

Given the salience of environmental issues during the 1980s, it is not surprising that international attention came to focus on the Brazilian Amazon. Brazil’s Legal Amazon is the largest tropical rainforest in the world, spanning over five million km² (Kolk, 1996, p.16; Fearnside, 2000 p.11). Beginning in the 1980s, daily news reports began to depict “an unparalleled onslaught on the Amazon rain forest by cattle ranchers, colonists, dam builders and gold miners” (Coomes and Barham, 1997, p.180). These reports were supported by technological advances in remote sensing and satellite imagery, which revealed alarming rates of deforestation (Pieck, 2006, p.313). According to some estimates, an area of 3.2 hectares of Brazilian rainforest was being cleared every minute (Fearnside, 2000, p.11). These findings produced considerable public outcry, and led to various efforts to ‘save the rainforest.’ At the same time, media attention also began to focus on the region’s traditional inhabitants; the escalation of violence and land conflicts along the Amazonian frontier made it difficult to ignore the effects of ‘development’ on Brazil’s indigenous peoples. Consequently, “the assault of rainforest peoples also emerged as a component of the bleak environmental picture” (Pace, 2004, p.231). In a matter of months, Brazil had acquired an international reputation as “an environmental villain for destroying the Amazon rainforest and for treating its native peoples so poorly” (Barbosa, 2000, p.81).

Ethnographic accounts of indigenous peoples

The perception of Indians as guardians of the rainforest stems in part from ethnographic studies of rainforest peoples. Beginning in the early 1980s, multidisciplinary research on rainforest communities suggested that indigenous peoples were highly capable of managing natural resources and conserving biodiversity over long periods of time (Pace, 2004, p.231). In 1982, for example, Darrell Addison Posey assembled a team of agronomists, botanists and other specialists to study the traditional biological knowledge of Kayapó Indians in Brazil’s Xingu Basin. After spending several years observing the tribe’s knowledge of plants, animals and ecosystems, Posey (1985) concluded

that the long-term management strategies of the Kayapó “actually increase biological diversity” (p.140). His work on tropical savannas demonstrated that what appeared to be naturally occurring forest ‘islands’ were not, in fact, ‘natural’ at all. Rather, these pockets of tropical forest were the product of Kayapó interference. Thus, Posey concludes: “The Indian example not only provides new ideas about how to build forests ‘from scratch’, but also how to successfully manage what has been considered to be infertile campo/cerrado” (Ibid, p.144). These findings were reiterated by William Balée (1993), who writes: “past and present indigenous agroforestry complexes of pre-Amazonia, and probably many of those elsewhere in Amazonia, do not *a priori* merit the charge of being degrading, but rather should be perceived in terms of their enhancing effects on the environment” (p.250).

Similar studies were undertaken in other parts of the world. Gadgil, Berkes and Folke (1993) present numerous examples of indigenous communities in Asia that have acted to conserve or enhance biodiversity. The authors’ general findings indicate that:

Where indigenous peoples have depended, for long periods of time, on local environments for the provision of a variety of resources, they have developed a stake in conserving, and in some cases, enhancing, biodiversity. They are aware that biological diversity is a crucial factor in generating the ecological services and natural resources on which they depend (p.151).

Gadgil et al. therefore see an important connection between indigenous peoples and biodiversity conservation. Likewise, fieldwork conducted by William Thomas (2003) in Papua New Guinea demonstrates that indigenous communities are capable of producing “small-scale disturbances that enhance rather than compromise biodiversity” (p.993). Thomas based his observations on the region’s Hewa inhabitants—a forest community that occasionally clears patches of primary forest for use as gardens. According to Thomas, these gardens provide habitats for a variety of species that cannot survive in primary forests. Each garden is then left to lie fallow for a period of 20 to 25 years, thereby generating secondary forests. In short, by cutting small sections of the forest, the Hewa “create a mosaic of primary forest, secondary forest, grasslands, gardens and the various phases of succession growth (gamma diversity)” (Thomas, 2003, p.993).

Ethnographic writing on indigenous peoples and conservation is now extensive and quite diverse. However, a brief survey of the literature reveals several common themes. First, indigenous peoples tend to be portrayed as shrewd ecologists with intimate knowledge of their environmental surroundings. Terms like *traditional ecological knowledge* (TEK) appear frequently throughout the literature, and are often used to support the use of indigenous knowledge in contemporary resource management strategies. TEK is promoted as a body of local, practical knowledge that has been accumulated and tested over generations “by observers whose lives depended on this information and its use” (Berkes, Colding and Folke, 2000, p.1252; see also Berkes, 1999, p.8; and Posey, 2000, p.191). As Ellen and Harris (2000) note,

[TEK] is the consequence of practical engagement in everyday life and is constantly reinforced by experience, trial and error, and deliberate experiment. This experience is characteristically the product of many

generations of intelligent reasoning, and since its failure has immediate consequences for the lives of its practitioners its success is very often a good measure of Darwinian fitness (p.5).

The ecological knowledge of indigenous peoples is therefore considered to be of great value because it has ‘stood the test of time’ and sustained indigenous communities “for thousands of years” (Posey, 2000, p.190).

A second characteristic of ethnographic literature is that it often presents indigenous peoples as deeply spiritual beings, imbued with a natural conservation ethic. Theorists tend to see quotidian practices of resource use as part of a broader indigenous worldview, in which the natural and supernatural frequently overlap. Janis Alcorn (1993) asserts, “In traditional societies nature is viewed as part of human society, and proper relations with nature are necessary in order to have proper relations between people, including past and present generations (p.425). Davis and Wali (1994) also refer to “persistent patterns of belief” that regulate indigenous land-use practices (p.485). For these theorists, indigenous knowledge of the environment is intimately tied to belief, and it is difficult to separate the spiritual from the non-spiritual (see also Ellen and Harris, 2000, p.5; and Berkes, 1999, p.13). Cross-generational communication, concern for the well-being of future generations and reverence for the spiritual world all work to shape daily interactions and indigenous patterns of resource use. Theorists have therefore argued that restraint and respect toward the natural world are integral parts of indigenous systems (Posey, 2000, p.191).

3.3 The Indian-environmentalist alliance

The concept of rainforest guardians quickly expanded beyond anthropology circles. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, international media reporting contributed significantly to a perception of native Amazonians as ‘natural conservationists’ who manage environmental resources in non-destructive ways (Barbosa, 2003, p.586). In 1992, for example, Kayapó leader Payakan made the cover of *Parade* magazine; the caption below his close-up reads: “A man who would save the world.” A similar article was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1991. Entitled ‘Lost tribes, lost knowledge,’ the news story warns of rapidly disappearing indigenous knowledge and the danger—to humanity—that such a loss entails. In the case of Brazil, mobilizing narratives of ecological Indians were also employed by movement activists themselves. According to Conklin and Graham (1995), spokespersons for both environmental and indigenous causes came to “speak in a shared idiom of solidarity between forest and city peoples, united by their respect for nature and commitment to protecting lifeways in harmony with the earth” (p.697).

Here, it is important to note that *both* environmentalists and indigenous representatives made use of the guardian metaphor. Focusing on the origins of such framing—i.e., ‘who started it’—is difficult and not entirely productive. In some cases, rainforest communities were persuaded by northern activists to reframe their struggles in environmentalist idiom (see Margaret Keck’s (1995) analysis of the Brazilian rubber tapper movement). In other cases, indigenous peoples voluntarily adopted the language of Western environmentalism. As

Beth Conklin (1997) notes, “Some native South Americans have learned to speak the language of Western environmentalism and reframe their cosmological and ecological systems in terms of Western concepts like “respect for Mother Earth,” “being close to nature,” and “protecting biosphere diversity” (p.712; see also Brysk, 2000, p.58; and Barbosa, 2003, p.586). In 1990, for example, the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) held a meeting in Iquitos, Peru, “to discuss the relationship between indigenous peoples and the environment” (Redford and Stearman, 1993, p.249). One of the key documents to emerge during the meeting was a declaration expounding the virtues of indigenous resource management:

Our accumulated knowledge about the ecology of our forest home, our models for living within the Amazonian Biosphere, our reverence and respect for the tropical forest and its other inhabitants, both plant and animal, are the keys to guaranteeing the future of the Amazon Basin. A guarantee not only for our peoples, but also for all of humanity. ...the most effective defense of the Amazonian biosphere is the recognition of our ownership rights over our territories and the promotion of our models for living within that biosphere (qtd. in Redford and Stearman, 1993, p.249-250).

COICA went on to propose “an alliance between northern environmentalists and Amazonian indigenous people on the basis of protecting an ‘Amazon for all of Humanity’” (Pieck, 2006, p.315). Similarly, indigenous interventions before the UN WGIP have frequently evoked conceptions of ecological guardianship. According to Andrea Muehlebach (2003), “indigenous delegates have since their arrival on the global political scene insisted on the inseparability of two seemingly separable realms—ecology and ethnicity. ...they regularly evoke the land...[and claim] that...[their] relationship to the land is inherently moral—that is, non-destructive” (p.426-435).

Rather than focusing on origin, then, it is much more helpful to view the concept of rainforest guardians as a mobilizing strategy employed by both sets of activists. Environmentalism’s strong public appeal during the 1980s and 1990s created a powerful political opportunity structure that both environmentalists and indigenous rights activists exploited to their advantage. A representative from Cultural Survival explains the appeal of this strategic framing, “We see ourselves as a human rights organization in the broadest sense, and that was certainly our first track of contact with indigenous rights. But we’ve moved into ecology...clearly it works better” (qtd. in Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.698). Similarly, a spokesperson from the Rainforest Foundation argues, “The rainforest card is stronger than the indigenous card. They [indigenous people] know that, and we [advocates] know that—and without that, indigenous peoples wouldn’t have a chance in hell” (Ibid, p.698). From an environmentalist perspective, the alliance with indigenous peoples proved equally attractive—albeit for slightly different reasons. According to Keck and Sikkink (1998), the eco-Indian alliance helped demonstrate that environmental considerations were not just an abstract concern for privileged northerners: “By linking environmental destruction to a concrete picture of how local populations lived in the forest, environmentalists were able to make

the tropical forest issue real to an international public” (p.141). In this sense, the image of a ‘victimized ecological native’ helped give the environmental critique of industrialization a sharper edge (Pieck, 2006, p.309; see also Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.701).

Consequently, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a proliferation of transnational alliances between environmentalists, human rights activists and remote Amazonian communities. Environmental NGOs such as the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund began to work with indigenous communities throughout the Amazon Basin to oppose ecologically destructive development projects, and to defend native rights to land and resources (Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.695). During the 1980s, a strong international campaign emerged around the Polonoroeste (and later Planaforo) development projects in the Brazilian state of Rondônia. Activists involved in these campaigns achieved a small victory in 1985 when the World Bank “temporarily suspended disbursements for Polonoroeste on the grounds that the Brazilian government was violating loan conditions on protecting natural and indigenous areas; this was the first loan suspension on such grounds” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p.139-140). At the same time, several Indian leaders began to travel abroad. Supported by environmental NGOs, representatives from Amazonian communities spoke at international ecology conferences and gave testimonies before powerful institutions such as the World Bank, the United States Congress and the European Union (Conklin, 1997, p.712; Barbosa, 2003, p.584; Dewar, 1995, p.236). The Kayapó gained an influential ally during the late 1980s when celebrity rock star Sting visited the Amazon basin, accompanied by photographers from *Vogue* and *People* magazine (Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.700). Sting later founded the Rainforest Foundation, and joined Roani on a highly publicized tour of Europe. By the early 1990s, rainforest Indians were widely regarded internationally as ecological stewards; their presence at “major environmental conferences had become almost de rigeur” (Conklin, 1997, p.721).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the development of an international indigenous-peoples movement. I began with the observation that prior to the 1980s, pro-Indian advocacy was framed almost exclusively in terms of human rights and cultural survival. I then demonstrated how this framework was expanded over the course of the 1980s and 1990s to include environmental considerations. These developments were attributed to several factors, including the rise of global environmentalism and new ethnographic literature on rainforest peoples. Against this backdrop, rainforest communities quickly acquired an international reputation as natural conservationists. Cultural survival was reframed as an environmental issue, and a host of international environmental organizations began to promote native rights to land and resources. These partnerships have had positive and negative repercussions, both of which are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

The (dis)advantages of transnational advocacy

4.1 Achievements of the network

Brazil's Indian movement is a textbook example of transnational network theory. According to Keck and Sikkink (1999), transnational advocacy networks (TANs) are most likely to develop when:

- (1) channels between domestic groups and their governments are hampered or severed...
- (2) activists or 'political entrepreneurs' believe that networking will further their missions and campaigns...
- (3) international conferences and other forms of international contacts create arenas for forming and strengthening networks (p.93).

Each of these factors contributed to the emergence of an international movement in support of Brazilian Indians. As noted above, Indian rights advocacy initially had a limited base of domestic political support; Brazil's ruling elites consistently ignored indigenous issues in pursuit of large-scale development and colonization projects. During the 1970s, Amazonian communities began to establish ties with northern activists and a variety of human rights organizations. These early linkages played an important role in the formation of domestic Indian rights groups and indigenous federations. At the same time, a series of international conferences, such as the UN Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Land, brought together activists from diverse backgrounds and provided opportunities to consolidate the emerging indigenous-peoples movement.

The shift toward 'rainforest guardianship' during the 1980s and 1990s is an example of a collective action frame intended to mobilize support for both indigenous and environmental issues. Network participants took advantage of environmentalism's strong public appeal and recast the issue of cultural survival with a distinctly ecological component. This process corresponds to what Snow et al. (1986) refer to as *frame extension*. According to Snow and colleagues, frame extension occurs when a social movement organization expands "the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents" (p.472). Ultimately, the goal is to enlarge the movement's support base "by portraying its objectives or activities as attending to or being congruent with the values of potential adherents" (Ibid, p.472). Therefore, in the case of indigenous activism, network participants broadened their primary framework of human rights to incorporate environmental considerations. The association between Amazonian Indians and northern environmentalists was primarily a *symbolic* politics, in which ideas and images were used to "mobilize political actions across wide gulfs of distance, language, and culture" (Conklin and Graham,

1995, p.696). Positive ideas about Indians living in harmony with nature became a powerful symbolic resource, and were used by movement activists to achieve resonance with Western publics (Ibid, p.696; Brysk, 2000, p.55-58).

The eco-Indian alliance has, without a doubt, benefited Amazonian Indians. During the 1980s and 1990s, the linkage with environmentalism provided indigenous activists with a much larger audience and, consequently, much greater visibility (Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.698). By tapping into global environmentalist sentiments, indigenous leaders were able to mobilize a broader base of transnational support, and for the first time, “their resistance began to pay off” (Barbosa, 2000, p.100). An illustrative case is provided by Conklin and Graham (1995). In the late 1970s, the Xavante Indian Mario Juruna became known in international human rights circles for his denunciation of the Brazilian government’s corruption and mistreatment of indigenous peoples. Juruna eventually became the first Indian elected to Brazil’s Congress of Deputies; yet very little was known of him outside of Brazil (p.700). In contrast, during the late-1980s, Kayapó leaders such as Payakan, Raoni and Kube-i achieved widespread international celebrity status. According to Conklin and Graham, the difference in these political trajectories can be attributed to the rise of environmentalism:

Environmentalism created an audience that enabled the Kayapó to become international stars in much the same way that receptive audiences are essential to the making of Hollywood stars. By linking their local struggles to global ecological concerns, the Kayapó were able to mobilize broad foreign support in a way that Juruna could not (p.701).

The environmental critique of Brazilian development policy was not easily ignored. The country’s large foreign debt had increased reliance on international lending institutions, and made government officials sensitive to international criticism (Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.699). In order to counter its negative image abroad, Brazilian policy makers were forced to incorporate indigenous and environmental issues into development planning. As Barbosa (2003) notes, “a negative image is an obstacle for a country so dependent on foreign loans and capital” (p.583). Consequently, during the early 1990s, the Brazilian government established Indian reservations in several areas that had been “adversely affected by rapid, large-scale economic development” (Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.699). In Roraima, the Yanomami were granted an area of 9.4 million hectares, despite strong opposition from local gold miners (Barbosa, 2003, p.584; Brysk, 1996, p.45; Redford and Stearman, 1993, p.251). Similarly, the Kayapó of Pará and Mato Grosso were granted land rights to 4.9 million hectares. Together, these reservations encompassed an area greater than Portugal and Switzerland combined. By 2000, official indigenous territory in Brazil comprised approximately 1 million km², or roughly 12 percent of the national territory (Barbosa, 2003, p.584; Schwartzman and Zimmerman, 2005, p.721). These achievements were the product of a *boomerang* pattern of influence, whereby international environmentalists and human rights activists amplified the demands of domestic indigenous groups and then echoed these demands back onto the Brazilian state. Using both material and moral *leverage*—i.e. the ‘mobilization of shame’—activists forced Brazilian policy makers to take action on indigenous and environmental issues.

4.2 Weakness in the network

Despite the advantages of transnational networking, there are inherent weaknesses in the Indian-environmentalist network. Some of these issues are characteristic of transnational advocacy networks in general; others are more particular to the global indigenous movement. For example, Keck and Sikkink (1999) state outright that the “boomerang strategy is politically sensitive, and is subject to charges of foreign interference in domestic affairs” (p.93). This was certainly the case in Brazil, where government officials have long viewed environmentalism with suspicion and contempt. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, international calls to save the rainforest were frequently denounced by Brazilian policy makers “as another attempt by the developed countries to limit...[the] economic growth [of developing countries]” (Barbosa, 2000, p.76). By partnering with northern environmental organizations, domestic NGOs and indigenous federations laid themselves open to the same critique. As Barbosa (2003) notes, “Funding provided by northern NGOs...led to accusations that domestic NGOs were puppets in a plot by foreigners to internationalise Amazonia” (Barbosa, 2003, p.584). These criticisms were by no means novel; environmental limitations to growth have been strongly resisted by developing countries since the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment. In this sense, Brazilian officials might have simply been exploiting a longstanding cleavage regarding the ‘right to development.’ Nevertheless, by linking indigenous and environmental causes, Indian activists risked compromising the seriousness of their struggle.

Representation

Another problem, which is more specific to the global indigenous movement, involves representation. In Chapter Two, I argued that Euro-American prejudice was a factor in the colonization and mistreatment of indigenous peoples. I described how Europeans and their descendants tended to view indigenous peoples as ‘evolutionary infants’ that needed to be modernized and incorporated into western society. Here, I will consider another trend in Euro-American thought: the idea of the ‘noble savage.’ The concept was popularized during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and has since been elaborated by various theorists. In its classic and most basic form, the argument states that indigenous peoples are innocent and free of corruption: “They live in a golden age...in open gardens, without laws or books, without judges, and they naturally follow goodness” (qtd. in Redford, 1991). These colourful narratives are often used to expose the shortcomings of modern social institutions, or to criticize the “destructive materialism” of the West (Conklin and Graham, 1995, p.696; Redford, 1991). On the surface, the idea seems to counter the more pessimistic view of Indians as ‘backward and inferior.’ However, the two frameworks are not necessarily in opposition. Both arguments essentialize indigenous peoples as the naïve inhabitants of a pre-historic state of nature. The primary difference is that one framework favours modernity; the other has serious reservations. In this context, images of ‘rainforest guardians’ and ‘stewards of the forest’ appear to be contemporary variations on a very old theme.

Evidently, today's guardian narrative is more complex than the noble-savage construct of times past. The emergence of global indigenous activism means that indigenous peoples can no longer be considered purely passive subjects of Western intrigue. As noted in Chapter Three, indigenous peoples have become a visible force in international institutions, and are increasingly shaping their image abroad. Yet despite these developments in international politics, the guardian metaphor bears a striking resemblance to the idealized 'primitive' of centuries past. Rainforest peoples tend to be portrayed as the last inhabitants of a garden of Eden; their time-tested ways of living with nature are promoted as an ideal to which 'modern' citizens everywhere should aspire. In this sense, contemporary representations of indigenous peoples tend to reinforce "two long-standing currents in Western thought: exoticism (which emphasizes the attraction of cultural difference) and primitivism (which celebrates non-Western societies' antithetical relation to Western civilization and its corruptions)" (Conklin, 1997, p.713; see also Brysk, 1996, p.46). Viewed in this light, mobilizing images of "ecologically noble savages" (Redford, 1991) have less to do with native Amazonians, and more to do with the perceived shortcomings of modernity. As Adam Kuper (2003) notes, "our conceptions of the primitive are best understood as counters in our own current ideological debates" (p.395). In the search for alternate models of development, indigenous peoples have emerged as a revered source of ancestral wisdom (Pieck, 2006, p.310; Kalland, 2000, p.319). The problem is that these ideas tend to "rely on obsolete anthropological notions and on a romantic and false ethnographic vision. Fostering essentialist ideologies of culture and identity, they may have dangerous political consequences" (Kuper, 2003, p.395).

Divergent expectations

Tensions often emerge when indigenous people fail to live up to outside expectations. In the early 1990s, many environmentalists were shocked to learn that the Kayapó had been profiting from gold-mining and illegal logging on their reservation. When Brazil's Environmental Control Agency (IBAMA) attempted to confiscate the logs, Kayapó warriors blocked their entry into the reservation (Barbosa, 2003, p.587). A similar standoff occurred in 1989, "when Guajajara Indians took prisoners in order to force the government Indian agency, FUNAI, to grant them permission to sell lumber from their lands" (Redford, 1991). These events received extensive media coverage, and created a backlash among many environmentalists (Conklin, 1997, p.726). As Richard Pace (2004) notes, the alleged 'guardians of the forest' had "turned out to give less-than-stellar performances in their role as forest stewards" (p.232). Consequently, many observers criticized the Kayapó and other indigenous communities for being 'traitors' to their own ecological principles. A statement in the *Dallas Morning News* reads: "What the Kayapó are doing is absurd, illegal, immoral and wrong" (qtd. in Mulder and Coppolillo, 2005, p.100). A similar article in *The Economist* stated, "the savage can also be ignoble" (Ibid, p.100).

In this context, the Indian-environmentalist alliance appears to be a precarious foundation for indigenous rights advocacy. The equation of indigenous resource management practices with Western conservation principles places unrealistic expectations on indigenous communities. When indigenous peoples fail to conform to these expectations, they are categorized as corrupt and inauthentic, thereby “undermining the symbolic values on which their participation in transnational politics is based” (Conklin, 1997, p.726). Indigenous activists face a dilemma: “they can forge alliances with outsiders...by framing their cause in terms that appeal to Western values and ideas about Indians, but this foreign framework does not necessarily coincide with indigenous peoples’ own vision of themselves and their futures” (Ibid, p.726). Indeed, indigenous communities might possess entirely different conceptions of conservation and environmental sustainability. According to Redford and Stearman (1993), “the biodiversity that conservationists are interested in conserving...usually includes the full set of species, genetic variation within these species, and the natural abundance in which these systems occur” (p.252). In contrast, the authors claim that indigenous communities tend to conceptualize conservation as the prevention of “large-scale destruction, such as cutting and burning of forest for cattle ranches; [and] building dams that...alter the landscape” (Ibid, p.253). From this perspective, indigenous peoples might never have been ecologists in the contemporary Western sense (Turner, 1995, p.120). Transnational alliances with indigenous peoples therefore need to be founded on realistic expectations. Indigenous peoples expect to be able to use their lands in order to ensure the cultural and physical survival of their people. Some communities might meet the demands of Western conservationists; others may not (Redford and Stearman, 1993, p.254). However, the position of indigenous peoples is weakened considerably when images of ‘natural conservationists’ are promoted only to be proven wrong.

4.3 Indian resistance at the turn of the century

Indigenous struggles for land and resources have continued into the twenty-first century. While Brazilian policy makers have taken positive steps in favour of indigenous and environmental issues, these changes “by no means constitute a major paradigm shift” (Hall, 2000, p.7). Deforestation remains alarmingly high, and frontier expansion continues to threaten indigenous lands. In many cases, these intrusions are “directly instigated or fostered by federal and state governments” (Turner and Fajans-Turner, 2006, p.3). In the states of Mato Grosso and Pará, for example, government officials have repeatedly attempted to build hydroelectric dams along the Xingú and its tributaries. Not surprisingly, these projects have been strongly resisted by the region’s Kayapó inhabitants (Ibid, p.4). The dramatic standoffs of the 1970s and 1980s have not disappeared either. In 2001, a group of 700 Terena Indians blockaded the BR-364 highway and took nine people hostage; their goal was the immediate conversion of 5,600 hectares of land into a reservation (Barbosa, 2003, p.585). In this sense, violence and confrontation continue to characterize the Amazonian frontier.

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples are currently engaged in “a number of battles on a number of fronts” (Muehlebach, 2003, p.416). This paper has focused primarily on the use of global environmentalism as a vehicle for pursuing indigenous land claims in Brazil. I began in Chapter Two by outlining the ideological and policy contexts in which Brazilian Indians began to mobilize and articulate grievances. I demonstrated that prior to the mid-1980s, the linkage between Brazilian Indians and global environmentalism was not particularly strong. Native Amazonians were assisted primarily by international human rights activists, and relied mostly on the morality of their cause. In Chapter Three, I examined how pro-Indian advocacy came to encompass a distinctly ecological component. I attributed this shift to a variety of factors, including the salience of global environmental issues, as well as strategic framing on the part of movement activists themselves. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Indian and environmental activists (re)produced a compelling narrative of Indians living in harmony with nature; transnational partnerships proliferated. In Chapter Four, I examined the success of these partnerships, and concluded with somewhat mixed results. The language of environmentalism has generated unprecedented support for indigenous issues—leading, in some cases, to more favourable government policies and the demarcation of Indian reserves. However, international support for indigenous issues needs to be founded on realistic assumptions. Mobilizing images of ‘rainforest guardians’ tend to misrepresent the priorities of indigenous communities as static and somehow frozen in time. Given the discrepancy between image and reality, the mobilizing potential of such images might prove unsustainable over the long term.

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