



THIS IS OUR EVERYTHING



STUDY GUIDE

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This is Our Everything

A bounty has been placed on Olimpio's head by the logging mafia because he organizes patrols to protect the remaining forest in the state of Maranhão, Brazil. With no government support, he and other activists comb the region in search of criminal gangs. More than environmental protection is at stake – the forest lies at the heart of the Guajajara and Awá cultures and identities. They are prepared to risk their lives to preserve it.

The Guajajara People

The Guajajara are an indigenous group that live in Brazil. They occupy a number of different Indigenous lands, which are all located at the eastern edge of the Amazon rainforest, in the state of Maranhão. This state is in the northeastern part of Brazil.

The Araribóia Indigenous territory is one of the territories that the Guajajara live in. According to AmazoniAlerta, a non-governmental organization that works to advance the rights of Indigenous peoples in Brazil, approximately 10,000 Indigenous peoples live in the Araribóia Indigenous territory. It says, "Arariboia is an Indigenous Land with 413 thousand hectares, known for its rich biodiversity and located in the State of Maranhão in the north east of the Amazon. The territory is amongst the most invaded and vigorously defended indigenous lands in the Amazon. Overall Maranhão has lost a quarter of its primary rainforest since 2002."¹

Indigenous Peoples in Brazil

Survival International, an organization that works to protect tribal peoples and their lands, estimates that approximately 1.7 million indigenous people live in Brazil, representing about 0.8 percent of the population and comprised of 305 different ethnic groups. It says, "Despite hundreds of years of contact with expanding frontier society, they have in most cases maintained their language and customs in the face of the massive theft of, and continuing encroachment onto, their lands."²

The organization explains that before the first European colonists arrived in Brazil in 1500, the indigenous population was far larger. It says, "When the first European colonists arrived in 1500, what is now Brazil was inhabited by an estimated 11 million Indigenous people, living in about 2,000 tribes. Within the first century of contact, 90% were wiped out, mainly through diseases imported by the colonists, such as flu, measles and smallpox. In the following centuries, thousands more died, enslaved in the rubber and sugar cane plantations."³

¹ <https://www.amazonialerta.org/team-member/environmental-agents-team/>

² <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/brazilian>

³ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/brazilian>

Indigenous Lands

The rights of the Brazil's indigenous people are now protected under the country's constitution. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) explains, "In 1988 . . . Brazil enacted a new constitution that gave historic rights to indigenous people; including the right to get their land back. It's resulted in the creation of nearly 400 indigenous reserves, many of which are in the Amazon. Here, indigenous people are free to keep their traditions, language, and culture alive."⁴ The Araribóia Indigenous territory is one of these reserves.

However, in many places, the constitutional rights guaranteed to the Indigenous are threatened by loggers, cattle ranchers, and others. Survival International explains that many indigenous people are forced to fight to defend their rights. It says, "Indigenous people in Brazil are pushing, day in day out, for the protection of their lands, for their rights – as enshrined in national and international law – to be upheld. . . . Today there are more than 200 Indigenous organizations in Brazil, fighting to defend Indigenous peoples' hard-won rights."⁵ It says that these organizations include the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon, and many smaller regional and local organizations. According to Survival International, the Guardians in the Araribóia territory have been running patrols for more than 15 years, and at least six of them have been killed.⁶

A number of different research studies have revealed that many indigenous communities do an excellent job of looking after their land. For instance, in a recent *New York Times* article the authors report, "Nature is healthier on the more than quarter of the world's lands that Indigenous people manage or own, according to several scientific studies. Indigenous-managed lands in Brazil, Canada and Australia have as much or more biodiversity than lands set aside for conservation by federal and other governments, researchers have found."⁷

Uncontacted Peoples

Some of the indigenous peoples who live in Brazil are uncontacted, meaning that they do not have contact with other indigenous groups or with non-indigenous people. Survival International states, "Brazil is home to more uncontacted peoples than anywhere on the planet. It is now thought that over 100 such groups live in the Amazon."⁸ The organization explains the importance of protecting these people. It insists, "Time and time again, contact has resulted in disaster for Brazil's uncontacted tribes. These very isolated peoples have not built-up immunity to diseases common elsewhere, which is why they are so vulnerable. It is not unusual for 50% of a tribe to be wiped out within a year of first contact, by diseases such as measles and influenza which can be brought in by loggers, missionaries, miners or other land-grabbers."⁹

⁴ <https://www.iwgia.org/en/brazil.html>

⁵ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/brazilian>

⁶ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/14086>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/climate/nature-conservation-30-percent.html>

⁸ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/brazilian>

⁹ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/uncontacted-brazil>

Deforestation in Brazil

In recent years, large areas of Brazilian forest have been cut down for logging, farming, and cattle ranching. Much of this deforestation is illegal. Environmentalists warn of potentially severe consequences if this deforestation continues because the disappearance of Brazil's forests—particularly the Amazon—could fundamentally change the world's climate. The Council on Foreign Relations explains, "The Amazon plays a critical role in climate regulation. Often referred to as 'the lungs of the Earth,' it produces between 6 and 9 percent of the world's total oxygen and long functioned as a carbon sink, absorbing more carbon dioxide than it emitted."¹⁰ It says that if deforestation continues at its current rate, the forests may reach a tipping point, where they are unable to recover.

In 2023, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva became Brazil's new president, and he has pledged to reduce deforestation. According to news reports, there was a reduction in deforestation in 2023.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think illegal logging harms the Guajajara people?
2. Why is life more difficult for the Awa people, as argued in the film?
3. How are the Awa affected by illegal loggers, as explained in the film, and how do the effects differ from those that the Guajajara experience?
4. How are Guajajara cultural practices threatened due to environmental degradation, as explained in the film?
5. How do you think a healthy forest in the Araribóia territory might be beneficial even to those people who do not live there?
6. What are the risks associated with being a Forest Guardian, as shown in the film?

Additional Resources

- Salomé Gómez-Upegui, "The Amazon Rainforest's Most Dogged Defenders Are in Peril," Vox, September 1, 2021.
<https://www.vox.com/down-to-earth/22641038/indigenous-forest-guardians-brazil-guajajara>
- International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, "Indigenous Peoples in Brazil," <https://www.iwgia.org/en/brazil.html>
- National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples, "Uncontacted Peoples," February 12, 2021.
<https://www.gov.br/funai/pt-br/atuacao/povos-indigenas/povos-indigenas-isolados-e-de-recente-contato-2/povos-isolados-1>
- Rainforest Foundation US, "Brazil." <https://rainforestfoundation.org/our-work/where-we-work/brazil/>
- Survival International, "Brazil: 5 Years On, Amazon Guardian's Killers Still Escape Justice," October 24, 2024.

¹⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/deforestation-brazils-amazon-has-reached-record-high-whats-being-done>

<https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/14086>

- Survival International, “The Uncontacted Indians of Brazil.”
<https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/uncontacted-brazil>
- Armani Syed, “Brazil’s Minister of Indigenous Peoples on Land Rights, the Climate Emergency and Empowering Women,” Time, October 29, 2023.
<https://time.com/6320891/sonia-guajajara-interview-leadership/>

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