

Indigenous People in Brazil

Fighting for Their Rights

Adriana de Andrade da Costa Couto

BEFORE YOU READ: Look at a map of the Amazon rainforest. Share what you know about this region and the people who live there.

Today in Brazil, the Indigenous people represent less than 1% of the total population. Most of them live in the Amazon rainforest. Some tribes do not have contact with non-Indigenous people, but this is very rare.

Unfortunately, my country, like many countries, has a long history of killing and exploiting Indigenous people, and removing them from their culture and lands. Even today, we continue treating them in the wrong way. In the name of progress, government and big business take over Native lands and extract natural resources that the tribes once used and protected. In this way, the knowledge gathered by generations of people living on this land is lost and forgotten. For Native people, they lose their way of life. And for everyone else in the world, we lose the opportunity



An Indigenous woman prepares for a protest in the capital of Brasilia. This image and the one in the box below are screenshots from a PBS video about Indigenous “Guardians of the Forest” fighting to keep their land.

Guardians of the Forest



Watch this 10-minute video: <www.pbs.org/newshour/show/amazon-forest-guardians-fight-to-prevent-catastrophic-tipping-point> about Indigenous people in Brazil who are “Guardians of the Forest.”

to learn from Indigenous people about natural medicine, ways of organizing society, and caring for nature.

Only in 1988, with the last Constitution, did the Indigenous people win some rights and acknowledgment that they were the original people on these lands. The government officially recognized them as citizens with different identities, customs, languages, and beliefs. There are now some government representatives of Indigenous heritage who fight for the rights of the native Brazilians to maintain their traditions and be protected from losing what is left of their societies.

However, it is still a very tenuous situation for the remaining Indigenous people. Many of them live in poverty, unprepared for the modern economy, and their families enter in to a cycle of dependence on government assistance programs.



Sonia Boni Guajajara, an Indigenous environmental activist from Brazil, spoke to the Brazilian Senate during a special session April 19, 2016. At the same time, representatives from many of Brazil's Indigenous peoples camped outside. They called for the rights of Indigenous people in the country. Photo: Waldemir Barreto <wikimedia.org>.

I think it is important for the Brazilian government and for Brazilians of every background to support Indigenous people. They are our history; we have a lot to learn from them. Our past cannot be lost.

Adriana is Brazilian. She came to the U.S. with her husband and two daughters so her husband can do post-doctoral work at Yale. In Brazil, she works as a personal trainer. She and her family are enjoying this opportunity to live in another country, learn about another culture, and improve their English.



Connect to Climate Change

The trees in the Amazon are a key part of the eco-system of the planet. They absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen. Scientists call the Amazon “the lungs of the planet.” According to the PBS video (see previous page), “The amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by the Amazon is down 30% since the 1990s, due to deforestation.” Learn more about climate change in Issue #27 of *The Change Agent*.

