

Clinging to the Forest Despite the Chaos

Kike Arnal for The New York Times
November 30, 2009

EDOWINÑA, Venezuela — The hunt for the tapir, a large mammal that roams the remote Caura forest in southern Venezuela, began at dawn. Sunlight peeked through the tree canopy, a piece of one of South America's last virtually pristine river basins.



The Ye'kuana and the Sanema use a vine poison to rouse fish from streams in the Caura forest in southern Venezuela.

Menace lurked on branches in the form of inch-long bullet ants, called “veinticuatro” since the intense pain from their sting lasts 24 hours. The shed skin of a bushmaster viper decomposed on the ground. Resonating moans of howler monkeys drowned out the buzzing of sand flies, which transmit a dreaded spleen-enlarging disease.

“Temblador,” said Romero González, 18, a Ye'kuana tribesman, grasping a machete in one hand and a 16-gauge shotgun in the other. He pointed at the carcass of a six-foot-long electric eel his

hunting party found in a stream a day earlier.

They sliced off part of the eel's head and ate it quickly for good luck. Then they came across a black curassow, a bird resembling a wild turkey, and promptly shot it. “The curassow is my favorite bird,” said Mr. González, referring to the roasted meat consumed for dinner the previous night.

Undisturbed by roads or hydroelectric dams, and largely forgotten by the rest of the world, the remote Caura covers a section of southern Venezuela larger than Belgium. Only about 3,500 indigenous people from two forest tribes, the Ye'kuana and Sanema, live in its rain forest and savannas, which are fed by rivers flowing down from the Venezuelan table-top mountains known as tepuis that geologists think are remnants of the mountains of the Gondwana supercontinent.

The Ye'kuana and the Sanema cling to their way of life here by hunting peccary, spider monkey and tapir. They farm manioc and use barbasco, a vine poison, to rouse fish from streams.

But their traditions are coming under siege, and anthropologists say it is a wonder that their cultures remain intact at all. Among the daunting challenges they face are a thriving illicit bush-meat trade, incursions by gold miners and the government's resistance to requests by the Caura's forest dwellers that they be given greater administrative control over their land.



The two groups have survived countless trials. Carib slavers from what is now Guyana's coast led 17th-century raids in the Caura, delivering captives to the Dutch. More recently, the Ye'kuana and Sanema fought a brutal war in the 1930s, apparently over Sanema raids for metal and women, forcing the Sanema into a subservient role in some Ye'kuana villages.

Somehow, the forests in which the two groups live were not felled. Historians credit this slip of fate to the Caura's remoteness, and to the country's overwhelming dependence on a different natural resource: oil. Projects to dam rivers were drawn up, then forgotten. Scientific research stations in the forest lie abandoned.

Foreign missionaries and anthropologists, once plentiful here, are now rarely seen. President Hugo Chávez expelled American proselytizers this decade, accusing them of espionage. For reasons not entirely clear, his government rarely grants permits to experts from abroad to conduct research in the Caura.

Partly as a result, conservation efforts here are almost nonexistent. One project by Caura Weichojo, a nongovernment group in the hamlet of Edowinña, records and catalogs the songs of hundreds of birds in the forest to teach children here about the Caura's rich wildlife, knowledge that is being eroded as the Ye'kuana and Sanema become increasingly exposed to the chaotic Venezuela around them.

"The sound of the Tokolomawai guides one under the tree cover to where the peccaries roam," said a Sanema who gave his name as Wokía ("just Wokía," he smiled) and said he believed he was in his 50s. He used his language's name for the bird called the marbled wood-quail in English.

The birdsong project, supported by ornithologists from the March Foundation, a California environmental group, stands in contrast to the pressures faced by the Ye'kuana and Sanema as the outside world sets its sights on their forests and rivers.

A glimpse of one possible outcome for the groups, assimilation, can be seen in Maripa, a town of about 4,000 residents six hours by canoe from Edowinña.

A strong military presence there — ostensibly to combat illegal gold mining in the Caura that is polluting rivers with mercury and resulting, in some cases, in miners burning the huts of the Ye'kuana and Sanema — serves as a source of tension. Last month, residents responded to a shooting episode by army soldiers, which wounded three people, by setting fire to the town's main military checkpoint.

But the government also brings resources that are impossible to refuse. One recent Saturday morning, officers in an armed civilian force nurtured by Mr. Chávez, the Bolivarian Militia, led about 30 recruits, nearly all Ye'kuana or Sanema, in reciting their official hymn. Officers said the recruits would receive about \$6 for showing up.

They meekly chanted: "All of Venezuela's people must grip their rifles. Man's true peace is his nation's progress."

Progress in Maripa, or what passes for it, manifests itself in a slum that serves as home for Ye'kuana who left Chajuraña, a village deep in the interior.

"We want money to buy things," said Silverio Flores, 49, who moved to Maripa's squalor three years ago. "If we join a mission," he said using the term for Mr. Chávez's social welfare programs, "maybe we'll get a monthly payment of some kind."

At a truck stop in Maripa, a dealer in illegal bush meat listed his products: tapir, agouti (a coveted rodent), curassow and peccary. He said prices ran about \$4 a kilogram for the wild animals, which had been killed near indigenous communities by poachers.

As others encroach on their land, the Ye'kuana and Sanema go on with their lives. They farm. They fish. They hunt. The results are not always promising. On the day of Romero González's hunt, the desired tapir was elusive.

A day later, the hunters' canoe drifted past a clearing in the forest where poachers had left the innards and bones of a freshly killed tapir to decay.

The canoe's pilot, Mocy Rodríguez, a 23-year-old Ye'kuana, pondered the significance. "Call it our reality," he said, as the rapids of the river swirled around his canoe. "Call it the end of our reality if it is not stopped."