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We help tribal peoples defend  
their lives, protect their lands  
and determine their own futures.

3 October 2011

Dear Mr Leckie,

**Lost Tribe of The Amazon - Sunday Night - Channel Seven**

Survival is the only international organization supporting tribal peoples worldwide. We were formed in London in 1969 and have consultative status at the UN's Economic and Social Council. We have supporters in 82 countries, including Australia, and have extensive experience of the tribes of the Amazon.

We consider the 4 September 2011 broadcast on Channel 7 of a report by Paul Raffaele and Tim Noonan on the Suruwaha tribe to be factually inaccurate, racially offensive and positively detrimental to the interests of the Suruwaha and other tribes in a similar position. We propose to file a complaint under the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice if we do not receive a satisfactory reply to this letter.

**Stone Age people**

The report and accompanying text and blog repeatedly claim that the Suruwaha are a Stone Age people, and that to visit them is "literally to time-travel back 10,000 years." The Suruwaha are, apparently, "some of the last survivors of a time way beyond historical memory, thousands of years ago." They live "caught in some kind of bubble of thousands of years ago."

Language of this sort perpetuates deeply engrained notions that isolated tribes are primitive, that they somehow lag behind the rest of us in their evolutionary development, and that they are our inferiors.

This may be good for audience ratings but is dangerous nonsense. It stokes the fires of prejudice that still pose a major threat – perhaps the major threat - to the welfare of forest dwelling Indians across South America.

In the language of section 1.9.6 of the Code it “provokes or perpetuates intense dislike, serious contempt or severe ridicule against a group of persons on the grounds of ... ethnic origin.” That the programme appears to have had precisely this effect at least in some quarters is clear from the response of one commentator on YouTube that all the Suruwaha should be “slaughtered”. “It must be done”, he considers. Many more have been highly critical of the programme, but others are likely to have been left with the impression that the Suruwaha are a backward people deserving of our dislike and contempt.

No Australian programme maker would dream of suggesting that Aborigines live in the Stone Age. Why should it be any more acceptable for him to describe Amazonian Indians in these terms?

### Lost tribe

In a similar vein, the programme makers have gone to great lengths to persuade the viewer that the Suruwaha are a “lost tribe” living in a “lost world”. This is no doubt why, for example, they are supposedly intrigued by the “books, boots and modern technology” that the crew have brought with them.

This is a breach of section 4.3.1 of the Code, which requires factual material to be accurate. The true position is that the Suruwaha have had regular contact with both governmental and nongovernmental organizations since the early 1980s. They have had axes, machetes, torches and other equipment for years. Aguniu, who features prominently in the film, has flown in aeroplanes, as have many others. About half of all living Suruwaha have at one time or another visited cities like Lábrea, Manaus, Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro.

These misrepresentations give a wholly distorted notion of the Suruwaha’s current situation. They allow Mr Raffaele to pose what he describes as “one of the most profound questions facing the world today.” This, apparently, is “What do we do with these stone age tribes? To let them live as they have for thousands of years protected from outside or to let them come out into our modern world?”

Actually, this is one of one of the world’s most profound no brainers. The Suruwaha already live in the modern world. The only “profound” question for them, as for all of us, is how best they can survive in it.

### Visuals

The manner in which the Suruwaha are visually portrayed in the film constitutes another breach of section 4.3.1. Those Suruwaha who were wearing Western clothing when the film crew arrived were told to take it off before filming started.

The intention was to show the Suruwaha as the programme makers imagined they might once have appeared rather than as they appear now. Viewers have been deceived into thinking that what they see on their screens reflects the current reality. It does not.

### Outside the law

The programme portrayed the Suruwaha not merely as primitive but as living outside the law, able to do with Messrs Raffaele and Noonan as they chose, without fear of the consequences. “We’re outside the protection of Brazilian law”, Mr Noonan dramatically announces at one point.

Although he and Mr Raffaele were at all times accompanied by an official from the Indian Affairs department, the two men supposedly faced “threats of murder”. “Had we been killed on that spot”, opines Mr Raffaele, “the Brazilian government would not have punished those Indians.”

This is false, and amounts to yet another breach of section 4.3.1. It is apparently intended to encourage the belief that the Suruwaha are somehow beyond the pale and beyond control (as well as a belief, perhaps, that Messrs Raffaele and Noonan are men of rare personal courage).

The true position is set out in Article 56 of the Indian Statute, which requires courts when they sentence an Indian convicted of a criminal offence to take account of his or her degree of acculturation. This provision was necessary precisely because the indigenous peoples of Brazil are subject to the same laws as everyone else.

### Infanticide

According to Mr Raffaele, “the Suruwaha believe that children born with birth defects or born to a single mother are evil spirits and should be killed in the most gruesome way possible. They take these poor little innocent babes out into the jungle to be eaten alive by the wild beasts or jaguars or they bury them alive, this is one of the worst human rights violations in the world.” Mr Noonan volunteers that “these lost tribes encourage the murder of disabled children.”

If these claims do not “provoke or perpetuate intense dislike, serious contempt or severe ridicule” against an ethnic group within the meaning of section 1.9.6, it is difficult to know what would. The claims are also in breach of section 4.3.1 because they are presented as indisputable fact. They purport to describe a practice that is invariably adopted where a child is born with a defect or to a single mother.

This also is false, as is perhaps demonstrated by the programme’s ability to cite only one alleged attempt at infanticide. We have not been able to verify Iganani’s story, but can confirm that every expert to whom we have spoken about the issue has said that infanticide is rare among the tribes of the Amazon, including the Suruwaha, and is declining.

Since the broadcast we have spoken to Dr João Dal Poz, an anthropologist with particular experience of the tribe. He has emphatically denied that there is any Suruwaha law or custom that requires the elimination of newborns - whether because they have a birth defect or a single parent, or for any other reason. A teacher who worked with the Suruwaha for five years, Adriana Huber, has told us that the last known instance of infanticide among the tribe was in August 1980.

Rather than speak to people with experience of this sort the programme makers have preferred to quote a human rights lawyer who, so far as we have been able to establish, has no personal knowledge of the Suruwaha and has never visited them.

The assertion that the Suruwaha kill their children as a matter of routine came originally from evangelical missionaries and their supporters. These missionaries have sponsored a bill currently before the Brazilian Congress which, if passed, would not only allow the authorities forcibly to remove any indigenous child deemed to be 'at risk' but require any Suruwaha, or anyone else for that matter, who believed an indigenous child to be 'at risk' to report that fact or face imprisonment.

The wisdom of these proposals has been fiercely debated in Brazil. Some believe that the proponents of the bill have sought deliberately to denigrate and destabilize tribal communities in order to justify the removal of their children, and that this is the real aim of the bill. They believe that the scandal of the stolen generations in Australia is about to be repeated in Brazil.

This is not a view shared by the programme makers, who have allied themselves with an evangelical missionary organisation called JOCUM or "Youth with a Mission". They are fully entitled to do this, of course, and to express their personal opinions in any way they choose.

But where there are different viewpoints on an issue, as there most certainly are here, they were duty bound by section 4.3.1 to represent these viewpoints fairly. The programme ought therefore to have made clear that the extent to which infanticide is still practised among the Suruwaha (if at all) is a matter of great controversy, and that there is no evidence – no evidence - that it is practised as a matter of course. The programme did not attempt to do this.

### Corrections

We have focused on the principal defects in a programme which gave a false or misleading account of almost every aspect of the Suruwaha way of life. Each of them constitutes a "significant error of fact" which Section 4.3.11 requires you to make reasonable efforts to correct at the earliest opportunity.

We consider that Channel Seven should at least make known to its viewers that it regrets the use of epithets such as "stone age" and "lost tribe", that the claim that the Suruwaha live outside the law is incorrect, and that there is no credible evidence that they resort to infanticide as a matter of course if a child is born with a defect or to a single mother. Viewers should also be told that some of the Suruwaha Indians seen naked in the forest had been asked to remove their Western clothes for the filming purposes. Any repeat broadcast in Australia should be accompanied by a statement to the same effect, as should broadcasts in other territories.

We are more than willing, however, to discuss any alternative proposal that may help to undo at least some of the damage that this programme has done, and that it will continue to do if it is broadcast again without an appropriate health warning.

It has become almost commonplace for filmmakers deliberately to sensationalise and distort the way of life of relatively isolated communities like the Suruwaha. They think that this will improve their viewing figures, and know that the communities subjected to this treatment cannot answer

back. They thereby deny vulnerable people the respect that they both deserve and require, and deprive the viewer of the fair and objective treatment to which he is entitled.

We are determined to do all we can to reverse this trend. If we do not receive your satisfactory response within 30 working days of the date of this letter, we will therefore refer this matter to the ACMA.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Corry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Stephen" on top and "Corry" below it, slightly overlapping.

Stephen Corry

Director