

Rainforest Indians threatened

'If the Berlin Wall fell, why can't the Darien Gap?'
Noemí Sanin, Colombian Foreign Minister, 1992

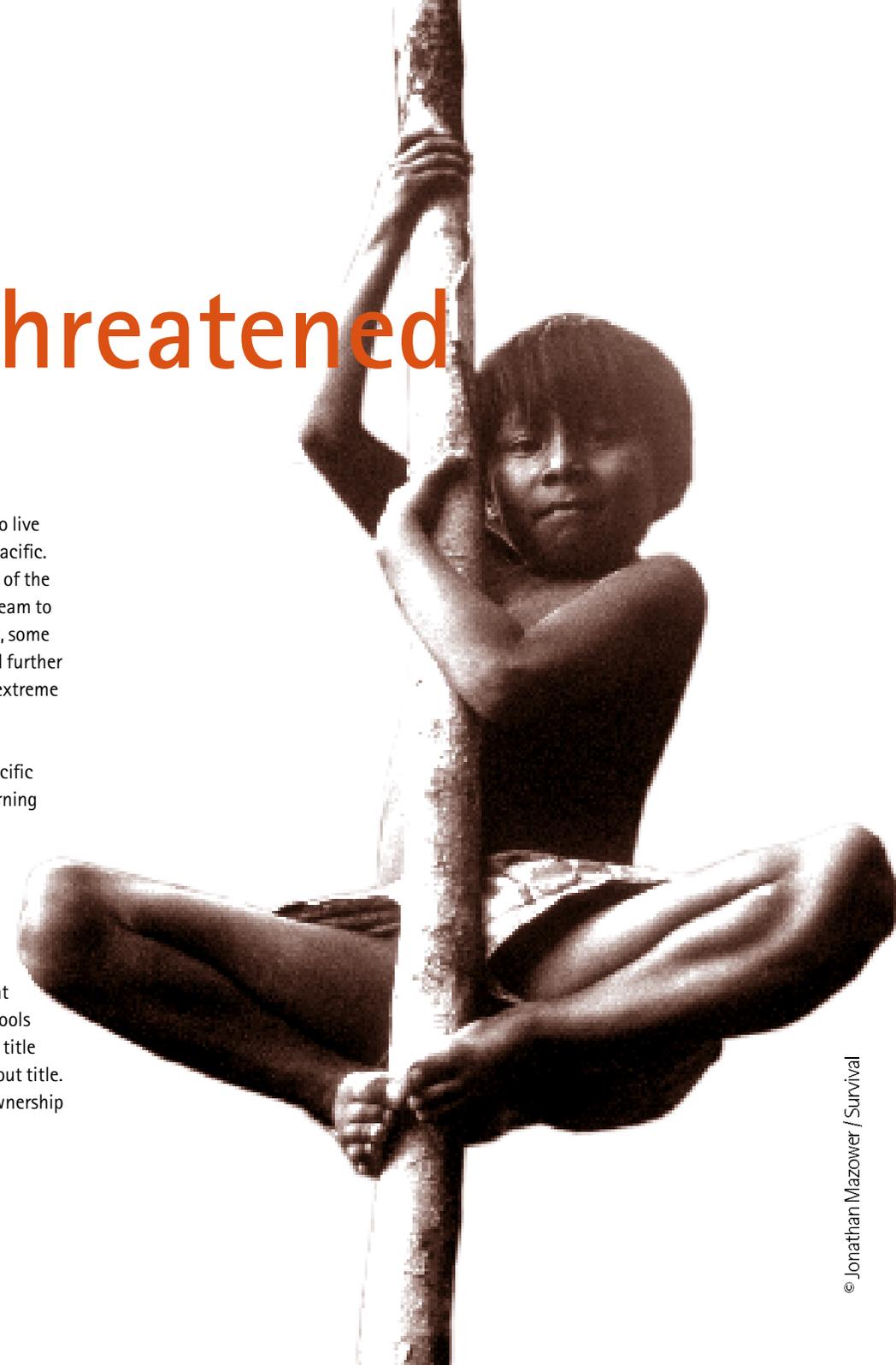
'The people of the city see the jungle as a piece of merchandise to be exploited for financial gain. God put us here. We are part of the forest. We see it as our friend and we will fight to defend it from greedy men.'
Waunana man

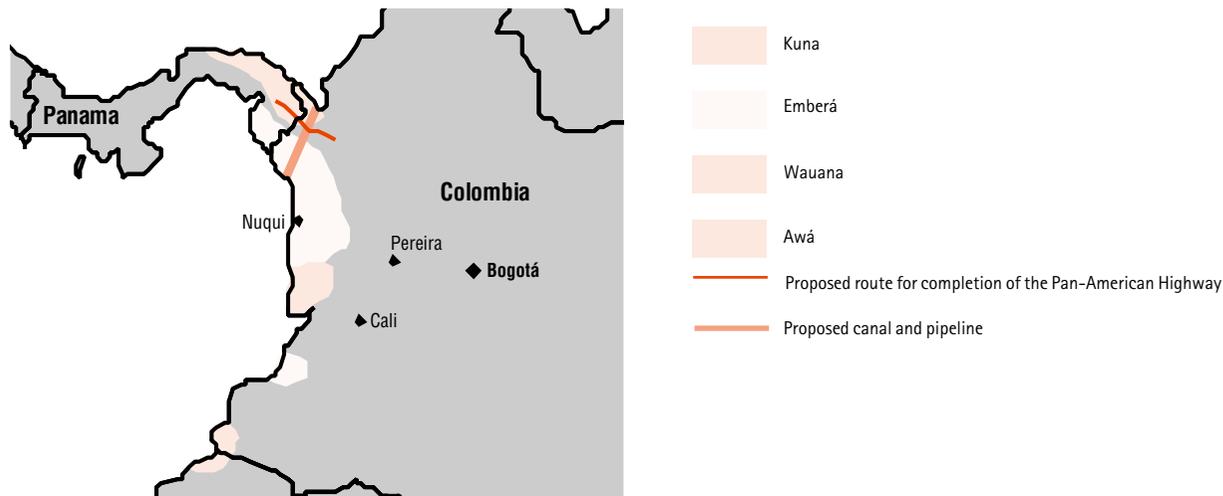
The Plan Pacífico ('Pacific Plan') is the name given to an ambitious project to industrialise the dense rainforests of the Colombian Pacific coast in South America. If it goes ahead, it will have terrible consequences for the indigenous and black people who live there.

The area is one of the wettest places on earth. Here, the warm, moist air of the Pacific meets the cold peaks of the Andes, giving a rainfall of over 5 metres a year. Sustained by this constant watering, the area boasts a flora and fauna even more diverse than the Amazon. It is also the ancestral home of 7,000 Waunana and 40,000 Emberá Indians, and around 700,000 black farmers, the descendants of slaves who escaped from Colombia's coffee estates and gold mines over 100 years ago. To the north live about 600 Kuna Indians, relatives of the Panamanian Kunas, while to the south are 10,000 Awá Indians.

The Emberá and Waunana are related peoples who live alongside the countless rivers that feed into the Pacific. Many of them formerly lived in the upper reaches of the tributaries of the main rivers, but moved downstream to be closer to sources of jobs and goods. Conversely, some people, particularly Emberá, retreated further and further upstream to escape persecution, and now live in extreme isolation.

Because of the daily rainfall, the Indians of the Pacific region cannot clear space for their gardens by burning small patches in the forest like Amazonian Indian communities. Instead, they let the cleared vegetation rot on the ground, and grow manioc, bananas and other fruits in the spaces. Fishing, growing fruits such as lemons and papayas, and small-scale logging, provide these people with a small cash income. They use this to buy equipment such as boats, outboard motors, materials for schools and some medical supplies. 83 communities have title to the land around their villages; 36 are still without title. The needs of black communities to secure land ownership are essentially ignored.





The Waunana and Emberá used to hunt with blowpipes, the darts tipped with poison extracted from tree-frogs. Today they mostly use guns.

Most Indian villages have small schools where the children learn Spanish, maths and Colombian history. There is often a stock of Western medicines, although there may be no one in the village who knows how to use them. When they get ill, however, most people will go to a shaman, an older person expert in the use of medicinal plants to cure disease. Waunana and Emberá shamans also use special 'curing sticks' which are waved over the sick person to drive out the bad spirits.

Since 1983 the Colombian government has attempted to 'integrate' the region more closely into the national economy, partly to take advantage of its huge mineral wealth (gold, platinum, bauxite), and partly to boost trade with countries of the Pacific rim. Its first effort at drawing together the numerous schemes for 'developing' the area was known as 'Plaidecop': the Integrated Plan for the Development of the Pacific Coast. Plaidecop stated that, 'This extensive region contains immense forest, fishing, river and sea-based mineral resources which the country requires immediately' The plan featured:

- extensive road-building
- the construction of a railway, oil pipeline and canal between the Atlantic and Pacific
- the creation of special economic zones to foster trade
- the completion of the Pan-American Highway.

The Pan-American Highway has always been unfinished in the Darien Gap, the dense rainforests at the border of Panama and Colombia, and both governments have wanted to complete it for over 20 years. Construction of the road through the forest and swamp would bring major devastation to what is at present an isolated and superbly rich environment. Survival's campaign in 1972/3 was instrumental in getting the project shelved then.

In 1992, then-President César Gaviria announced a new plan, known as the 'Pacific Plan: A new Strategy of Sustainable Development for the Pacific Coast of Colombia.' This also proposed the construction of roads linking the Pacific coast with the interior, including one between the city of Pereira and the small port of Nuqui, something that the Indians and blacks have fiercely opposed (their protests managed to get work on it temporarily halted). In addition, the completion of the Pan-American Highway is also given priority.

The Panamanian government supports this in the face of determined opposition from Indian communities who oppose all work on the Highway until their lands have been titled and they have been adequately consulted. Survival has protested to the Panamanian President about these plans.

Colombia's ambassador to Panama has said, 'Colombia is ready to start building now. If Panama delays, we'll build our side anyway. This area is really a tremendous obstacle to trade, the only break in the Pan-American Highway. Before, we didn't have the technology to get through, but now we can do it. Just think – only 102km more highway is needed to unite the Americas.'

Meanwhile, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is putting up US\$1.5 million to finance environmental studies related to the completion of the last section of the highway. The IDB rarely finances studies for projects that it is not interested in funding.

Background Reading

Barnes, Jon, *The Colombian Plan Pacifico: Sustaining the Unsustainable*, CIIR Occasional Paper, London, 1994.
Atkins, Andy and Rey-Maqueira Palmer, Elena, *Ethnodevelopment: A proposal to save Colombia's Pacific Coast*, CIIR Briefing, London, 1996.

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