

The Tribe's the Thing: Exploring the Future of Tribal Peoples

By [Sara Shahriari](#) March 11, 2012

Stephen Corry's *Tribal Peoples for Tomorrow's World: A Guide* (Survival International, 2011) offers a galloping overview of the history and modern challenges faced by its title subjects around the globe.

Corry, director of the tribal rights group Survival International, has decades of experience visiting with and learning about tribal peoples. His writing reflects that, and it is conveyed with accessible and compelling text. You won't find theory or jargon here, just information, insights and opinions laid out sensibly and clearly.

Corry begins by exploring definitions of the words *tribal* and *indigenous*. Though the terms are nebulous, the author does a good job of talking about the differences between groups and why these distinctions can be important in regard to international agreements and human rights.

"Tribal peoples are those which have followed ways of life for many generations [and] are largely self-sufficient," Corry writes, "and are clearly different from the mainstream and dominant society."

Forty percent of the world's 370 million indigenous people are tribal, Corry estimates, and he notes that while the overall indigenous population is increasing, the actual number of tribal peoples is falling precipitously. As he takes the reader on a tour around the world, touching on tribal peoples' experiences on each inhabited continent, several themes emerge. The most powerful is land—specifically, the idea that what tribal peoples need most is keeping their territory so they can continue to support themselves.

But the details of preserving land for tribal peoples can be complex and surprising. For one thing, governments can make powerful arguments about how a dam, road or mining project will benefit society at large, even though it harms a small tribal group. Corry rejects that notion, saying that tribal peoples are unlikely to benefit from these projects. He points out that in recent decades, national parks, conservation efforts and large-scale farming of bio-fuels have become a major threat to tribal peoples' right to use their lands.

The book challenges racist and paternalistic attitudes that are often used to devalue tribal peoples. It questions the assumption in developed countries that the whole world should move toward their way of life. The text is also filled with surprising bits of information on often-overlooked situations, ranging from the ongoing Indonesian occupation of West Papua to the shockingly low life expectancy for men on the U.S. Pine Ridge reservation.

Tribal Peoples is a valuable overview, covering a tremendous amount of ground in just 330 pages that could well be used in high schools and colleges. It is also a great resource for people in all lines of work who want to draw parallels between the issues that tribal peoples face the world over.

That said, the book has its shortcomings. It contains no bibliography, few citations and no footnotes. This simplicity makes *Tribal Peoples* a quick and easy read, but it is troubling for anyone who wants to review Corry's sources to see where his information comes from and how he derived his statistics. The lack of a bibliography leaves readers who want to learn more without an easy way to find further related material.

Each chapter in *Tribal Peoples* begins with a short, relevant quote from a tribal person, who, toward the end of the book, contribute some lengthier pieces of writing. However, the book could have benefited greatly from mini-chapters containing writings by, or interviews with, tribal peoples. After all, Corry wants to demonstrate that people in the developed world have many connections to tribal peoples. A good way to accomplish this would have been to give us the rare opportunity to hear their voices.

Corry has built his life around learning about tribal peoples and the racism and marginalization they face all over the world. Thus, his book is not a cold, clinical study of those issues but rather a passionate and readable defense of some of the most vulnerable citizens of the planet.

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