

Rainforests and Indigenous peoples

(for learners aged 7-11)

Dear educator,

Thank you very much for choosing Survival International's educational resources. A core part of our mission is supporting teachers in introducing Indigenous rights to young people. Our engaging resources are designed to make learning about the struggles and rights of Indigenous peoples accessible and meaningful for students of all ages.

This three-part lesson series aimed at young people aged 7-11 intends to foster students' understanding of the deep connection Indigenous peoples like the Yanomami have with their rainforest, the consequences of its destruction as well as their role in protecting the world's rainforests. It contains a short introduction and overview of the lesson series as well as the following three lessons:

Lesson 1: The Amazon rainforest – home of the Yanomami people

Lesson 2: Rainforest destruction and consequences for the Yanomami

Lesson 3: Indigenous peoples protecting the world's rainforests

Before you use this series of lessons with your students, you may want to look at our [*Introduction to Indigenous peoples*](#) for learners of all ages.

Please feel free to use this resource to best suit your students' needs. All we ask is that you reinforce **three key messages**:

1. There are more than 476 million Indigenous people worldwide, who form part of extraordinarily diverse societies with ways of life that are just as modern as anyone else's. They have technologies, laws, education, religions, and complex social, political, and economic structures. Like all societies, Indigenous peoples continually evolve – embracing tools like mobile phones and social media while adapting their ancestral techniques to challenges such as climate change. This doesn't make them any less Indigenous.
2. Indigenous identity is deeply rooted in their reciprocal connection to their land. Many Indigenous peoples rely on their land for their livelihoods which are largely self-sufficient. The intricate systems they have developed to live sustainably on their land foster strong community ties. Indigenous peoples actively shape and safeguard some of the planet's most biodiverse regions, preserving them for future generations.
3. Indigenous peoples around the globe show remarkable resilience in the face of systemic racism, land theft, forced development, and genocidal violence. They fight tirelessly and strategically to defend their rights, territories, and ways of life. Supporting their struggle and standing in solidarity with their pursuit of justice and self-determination is essential.

To learn more about how to teach about Indigenous peoples' rights and struggles in a culturally sensitive manner, we invite you to look at our [Teaching guidance Indigenous peoples: Dos & Don'ts](#).

Your Survival education team

About Survival International

Survival International is the global campaigning movement for Indigenous peoples' rights. Since 1969, we've been working to prevent their destruction and give them a platform to speak to the world about the genocidal violence, slavery and racism they face on a daily basis. By lobbying the powerful, Survival helps defend the lives, lands and futures of people who should have the same rights as other contemporary societies. Unlike many other organizations, Survival refuses government money and does not take donations from companies that might violate the rights of Indigenous peoples. To learn more, visit www.survivalinternational.org

0: Introduction & Overview

Rainforests are not the pristine, uninhabited spaces we are often led to believe. Across the world, **millions of Indigenous people call rainforests their home** and depend on them for their survival. **About 1.5 million Indigenous people live in the Amazon alone!** In places where their rights are respected and their territories protected against invaders, they can thrive.



Rainforests are safest in the hands of Indigenous people: [satellite images](#) show clearly that protecting Indigenous territories is the best barrier to deforestation. They are **nature's best guardians**, protecting the forests that are vital to their existence for generations to come. **We cannot teach about rainforests without teaching about Indigenous peoples.**



Click [here](#) to watch a video of the Baka making an incredible rainforest shelter in Cameroon

This series is structured as follows:

Lesson 1: The Amazon rainforest – home of the Yanomami people

Students will see how their complex understanding of nature means Indigenous peoples like the Yanomami can thrive in their rainforest home – and are doing everything they can to protect it.

Lesson 2: Impact of rainforest destruction on the Yanomami

Students will see the dire effects of deforestation on Indigenous peoples like the Yanomami.

Lesson 3: Indigenous peoples protecting the world's rainforests

Students will see the crucial role the world's Indigenous peoples play in protecting our planet.

Before delivering your lessons

- **Listen to Indigenous peoples' voices:** To prepare for lessons, we urge educators to watch additional Indigenous testimonies to those included in this resource via [Survival International's Indigenous Voices project](#).
- **Read our cultural sensitivity document:** It's crucial to teach about Indigenous peoples in a culturally sensitive way. Our [Teaching guidance: Indigenous peoples: Dos & Don'ts](#) is a great place to start.
- **Explore our full list of exciting resources:** If you prefer to create your own lesson plans, that's totally fine to us – check out our audiovisual school resources for children aged 5-11 right [here!](#)

Lesson 1: The Amazon rainforest – home of the Yanomami people

“What do we feel living in the rainforest? We feel free!”
Nixiwaka Yawanawá, Yawanawá people, Brazil

Lesson starter idea

Listening activity: Students close their eyes and listen to [“Sounds of the Rainforest – Is there anybody there?”](#)



Please note, all the “Sounds of the Rainforest” recordings were made using binaural sound. For full effect, students should listen with headphones. We aim to make this an immersive experience as possible, simply tell students they're going on an exciting journey somewhere new, to close their eyes, listen carefully, and be ready to share their thoughts afterward.

- **Sensory questions:** Have students imagine themselves in the place they hear in the soundscape. Ask students to share what they see, smell, and hear, and how they feel about ‘being’ there.
- **Identify the animals:** How many different sounds do they hear? Are there any animal sounds they recognize?¹
- **Elicit the word rainforest:** Students can guess where they ‘are’ in the soundscape and why. You could also ask if they’d like to live in the rainforest and if they think they could survive there, and why (or why not).

Main part of lesson

Possible discussion questions pre-listening activity

¹ Note: The scary-sounding animal you can hear at 01.17 is a howler monkey. Some Indigenous peoples, like the Awá, keep orphaned howler and capuchin monkeys as pets.

Students reflect on whether they think people also live in rainforests, what would they be like, how would they live and how would their lives differ from our own.

Listening activity: Students close their eyes and listen to [“Sounds of the Rainforest – We’re here too!”](#)

After listening to this soundscape, you can reveal to your students that they’ve heard Yanomami people in the rainforest preparing timbó poison from a vine. Yanomami women and children collect the leaves and make the timbó by pounding them into a pulp. When it is put into the water, it makes the fish sleepy, so they can pick them up with their hands.



Possible discussion questions

Ask students to imagine the people they hear in the track: who they might be, what might they be doing? Do your students recognize the language being spoken? What details can they pick up from what they can hear, such as different ages, genders and emotions? What picture of the community begins to form in their minds?

The Yanomami



The Yanomami are one of the many Indigenous peoples living in the Amazon rainforest, with around 45,000 people living in different communities across Brazil and Venezuela. Like so many Indigenous peoples, their lives are deeply connected to their land, which is vital for their survival.

“The environment is not separate from ourselves; we are inside it and it is inside us; we make it and it makes us.”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

The relationship that Davi Kopenawa speaks of is reflected in the diverse ways that the Yanomami use plants for food, medicine and building materials, using up to 500 different plants in their day-to-day life.

Rainforest plants as homes



© Guilherme Gnipper Trevisan/FUNAI/Hutukara

"Here you can see my house, it is round and large. We don't live mixed; each family lives in a portion for themselves, although there are no walls."

Ehuana Yaira Yanomami

Yanos, or shabonos, are circular, with a large open area in the middle. They can be up to 80 meters long (longer than three swimming pools!), housing up to 400 people. As Ehuana mentions, each family has their own space within the yano, and their own fire for cooking during the day. During cool rainforest nights, Yanomami families sleep in hammocks near their fires. Yanos are built using more than fifty types of rainforest plants, showing the Yanomami's knowledge and expertise in using forest plants.

"The forest alone is where true worth lies ... Pots turn black, hammocks get holes, and the paper skins of money fall apart in the rain."

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

Rainforest plants as food and drink

The Yanomami's diet is highly diverse: Much of the Yanomami's food comes from lush rainforest gardens, cultivated with skill and care. Families may grow up to 60 different crops, like cassava, papaya, maize, sugar cane, yam, sweet potato, bananas, and up to 14 different varieties of plantains!



© Survival

In addition to hunting meat, which makes up a small proportion of their diet, the Yanomami also catch fish and collect shellfish, insect larvae and wild honey – an incredible 15 different kinds of honeys are harvested! The Yanomami also forage a large variety of fruit, nuts and seeds.

Foraging and preparing rainforest plants requires impressive knowledge: Some wild seeds are toxic and require complex processes – different for every species – to become edible. One species even requires six hours of boiling before it is safe to eat.

The Yanomami even get salt and water from rainforest plants. While we turn on a tap (which may seem easier, but involves complex infrastructure such as treatment plants, pipes and pumps), the Yanomami know which rainforest vines can be cut to find perfect drinking water. They cleverly make vegetable salt from the ash of the Cachimbo tree – talk about sustainable living!²

Rainforest plants as medicine

"In the old days, people were very wise! They knew a lot about the plants of the forest. When someone got sick, they would go look for medicine in the forest. They knew which

² Sources: <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/yanomami>;
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265397453_Yanomami_A_forest_people

bark, which leaf, which root could heal. Today, many have forgotten, but those who still remember, still take care of us with these plants. They have power!"

Justino Yanomami³

The Yanomami are known to use some 100 different plants and fungi for medicinal purposes. Using medicinal plants requires remarkable expertise: different plant parts need to be prepared and used in a certain way, depending on what's wrong. Consider the following examples:

- Head and tummy aches: bark or plants stems are pounded to extract juices then wrapped around where it hurts.
- Colds and dizziness: the scent of crushed leaves is inhaled.
- Eye problems: leaves or bark are heated in the fire and then held up to the open eye to release their medicinal properties.
- Other illnesses: various hot or cold infusions from tree bark and vines are made to drink.

"The forest cannot be bought; it is our life and we have always protected it. Without the forest, there is only sickness, and without us, it is dead land."

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

Rainforest plants as household items and tools



The Yanomami's ingenuity in using plants is truly remarkable. They craft intricate sieves, sturdy baskets, and practical backpacks. When venturing deeper into the rainforest, they weave simple, disposable hammocks from strips of inner bark. Yanomami babies are securely carried in slings made from tree trunk fibers. Plant stems are transformed into flutes and whistles while tree resins light their way as nighttime torches. Vines become string or disposable foot-loops for tree-climbing, and tree bark fibers are expertly weaved into strong ropes.

"You talk of the planet, yet you don't think it has a heart and breathes, but it does. You talk politics and study on paper. But we study in the forest and look carefully."

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

Rainforest plants for color

³ Source: Manual dos remédios tradicionais Yanomami, page 16: <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/acervo/publicacoes-isa/manual-dos-remedios-tradicionais-yanomami>



Rainforest plants can make amazing colors, often used in body paint. The Yanomami use unripe fruits of the *Genipa americana* to produce a striking black dye and the leaves of the *Picramnia* plant yield a rich purple, while the *Achiote* plant provides a vivid red color.

Activity: Students match each photo with how the Yanomami use different plants, writing the photo number in the provided boxes.

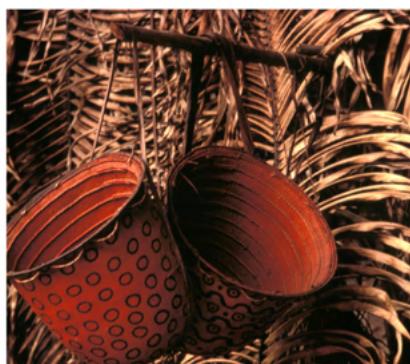
Example

- ...to collect food and firewood
- ...to make houses
- ...for food
- ...for drink
- ...to carry liquids like water
- ...for medicine⁴

1

2

3



4

5

6



4 to crush acai berries (Yanomami man crushing açaí berries); 5 to collect food and firewood (Gourds, used for making cups); 6 to make houses (Yanomami man building a shelter)

“You have schools, but we know how to look after the forest. It is very important for the governments of the world to listen to us, the Indigenous people who have lived on the planet for thousands of years.”
Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

Possible discussion questions

1. **Davi Kopenawa Yanomami’s insights:** Re-read Davi Yanomami’s words throughout this section. What do his words teach us about the Yanomami’s relationship with nature? In what way is how the Yanomami think about nature different or similar to your own?
2. **Plant Knowledge Challenge:** The Yanomami use an impressive 500 plants in their everyday lives. How many local (where you live) plants can you identify? Do you know their uses? Do you use local plants in your everyday life?
3. **Different perspectives:**
 - a) Reflect on these statements about plants and trees. Which ones do you agree/disagree with? Why?

Plants and trees are:

Food · medicine · shelter · more important than humans · more important than money · necessary for survival · part of your family

- b) Based on what you’ve learned about the Yanomami so far, how do you think they would respond to each of these statements?
4. **Learning from Indigenous peoples:** The Yanomami, like many other Indigenous peoples, have ways of life that are different from what many of us are familiar with. Why do you think it’s important to learn about people like the Yanomami? What valuable lessons can we learn from their way of life?
5. **Yanomami Egalitarian Society:** The Yanomami believe in equality, with no chiefs and decisions made collectively after thorough discussions. Do you think this is an effective way to organize society? Why or why not?

Lesson 2: Impact of rainforest destruction on the Yanomami

“Without our forest, we are nothing”
Hamangai, Terena and Pataxó Hã Hã Hæ people, Brazil

As we’ve seen, so long as the rights of Indigenous peoples are respected and their land protected, they can thrive thanks to their extensive knowledge of their environment. However, around the world, from the Amazon of South America the Congo Basin of Africa, the lives of rainforest peoples are at risk due to invaders destroying the forests they depend on.

Lesson starter ideas

Listening activity: Students close eyes and listen to [“Sounds of the Rainforest – Don’t destroy our homes!”](#)



This track is difficult to listen to as it includes disturbing noises of destruction like chainsaws and falling trees. For noise-sensitive students, we recommend using the introductory video instead.

Possible discussion questions

- **Emotional responses:** Students could share their feelings about the audio and why it affects them. Ask them to reflect on how they'd feel if these noises were heard near their own homes.
- **Prediction:** Ask students what they think is happening in this audio, why it is happening, and what the impact is for both the environment and Indigenous people living there.



Watch this brief video highlighting the devastating impact of deforestation facing the Awá people of Brazil



Invite students to:

- Share their feelings on seeing this video:
“I feel... because...”
- Explain in their own words the meaning of the quote **“If you destroy the rainforest, you destroy us too”**

“Destroying the rainforest means destroying the lives of Indigenous peoples because...”

“Destroying the rainforest would also affect our own lives because...”

- Imagine your students could talk to people responsible for the destruction we see in this video: what message would you want to give to them?

“I want you to know that.../ I want you to remember that...”

Main part of lesson

The Yanomami: In serious danger in the Amazon rainforest

“Give us back our lands and our health before it’s too late for us and too late for you.”
Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

The Yanomami face catastrophe: Thousands of illegal gold miners have invaded their land and are destroying the forest which the Yanomami depend on for their survival. Hundreds of Yanomami have died in recent years. Brazilian President has declared it a “genocide”.



One of the many illegal gold mining sites in the Yanomami territory. © FUNAI

“Why is it taking so long to believe that if we hurt nature, we hurt ourselves?”
Davi Kopenawa Yanomami



Watch [the video](#) to hear Maurício Iximaweteri Yanomami speak about the devastating impact of illegal gold mining on his land



What does Mauricio say about:

- the dangers of harmful chemicals – like mercury – used in illegal gold mining impacting Yanomami health?
- other illnesses caused by illegal mining?
- the message he wants to send to other countries?

Consider Mauricio’s words below:

“All humans belong to the Earth, so why are humans destroying the land?”

- What do you think Mauricio means by his question? Do you have any answers?

“The Earth is human like us, it feels pain. The Earth needs peace, like us.”

- To what extent do you agree? Why/ why not?

Indigenous peoples: under threat in rainforests across the world

Sadly, the situation faced by the Yanomami is a pattern repeated too often: deforestation is affecting millions of Indigenous peoples living in forests across the world from Indigenous peoples in West Papua to the Baka of the Congo Basin of Western and Central Africa. Across the world, rainforests are being destroyed at a rate of **10 football fields** each minute.⁵

This is not only an environmental catastrophe: it's a humanitarian disaster for the people who call rainforests home.



Few people on earth have as close a relationship to the forest as the Baka, Indigenous hunter gatherers who have lived in, protected and shaped the Congo Basin rainforest for generations. In many areas the Baka live alongside high densities of endangered species. For example, the Baka have over 15 words for elephant, according to their sex, age and even temperament. **For more on the Baka, check out [this resource](#).**

The Baka, Congo Basin.



[Listen to Indigenous people explain the impact of deforestation on them](#)



"We need our forest standing"

- To Hamangai, why is protecting the forest so important?

"For us, nature is our Mother"

- In Brazil: Why is Tainaky so concerned about forests disappearing? Give at least 3 ideas.
- In the Congo Basin: How do Suzanne's words and the footage of the Baka help us see why deforestation is so devastating for the people?

⁵ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/04/global-deforestation-rainforest-climate-goals-brazil-colombia-agriculture#:~:text=Global%20rainforest%20loss%20continues%20at%20rate%20of%2010%20football%20pitches%20a%20minute,This%20article%20is&text=The%20destruction%20of%20the%20world's,Colombian%20Amazon%2C%20new%20figures%20show>

- In Indonesia: Why is Temenggung so worried about the Orang Rimba losing their forests to oil palm and timber companies in Indonesia?

"I can't show that my heart is breaking"

- At the end of the video, Tainaky explains how he mustn't get sad. Why do you think that is?



Tainaky Tenetehar and other members of the Guajajara people, Brazil

Look at the picture: do your students recognize anyone?



We've just seen Tainaky Tenetehar in the video. Here he is again in the photo, wearing a yellow shirt, with fellow members of his people. Let's use this example to challenge a common myth: you can't tell if someone is Indigenous just by how they look.

Whether Tainaky wears a yellow shirt or is bare-chested with a crown of leaves makes no difference whatsoever, his Indigenous identity comes from his family history and connection to his people's land.



Spread the word!

Let's recognize the bravery of Hamangai, Tainaky, Suzanne, Temenggung, and others who shared their testimonies. It's crucial to uplift their voices, to honor their courage, and raise awareness. Discuss with students how they'd like to spread the messages and words of Indigenous people they've heard or read about.



Get creative! Show your students this powerful animated video that portrays the situation facing the Yanomami



- How does the video make your students feel? Why?
- What important messages do your students think the video successfully gets across?
- Although the video has almost no spoken words, the creators importantly included Yanomami voices. Can students translate the banners Yanomami people hold at the end?



Now brainstorm creative ideas with your students on how best to raise awareness about the Yanomami's situation.

If you like, send your students' work to info@survivalinternational.org – we'd love to see it.

A friendly reminder to read our [Teaching guidance: Indigenous peoples: Dos & Don'ts](#) before undertaking creative tasks like this.

Lesson 3: Indigenous peoples protecting the world's rainforests

"As long as we're here, the forest will be fine."

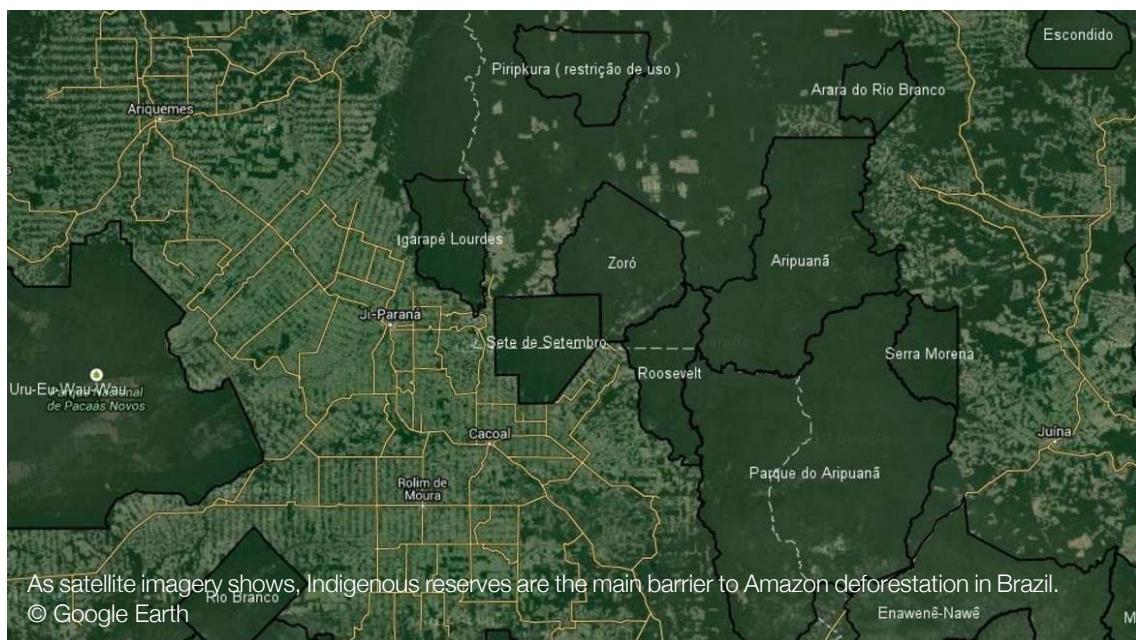
Sukraam Bhaiya, Baiga, India

Leading the way on sustainability and preserving the planet

Indigenous peoples are not merely victims in the climate crisis; their expertise is key to tackling it. They have mastered what we're still trying to learn: they've lived sustainably for generations, respecting nature and conserving resources for the future. Their wisdom is crucial for guiding us toward a more sustainable way of life.



Satellite images like the one below prove beyond doubt that Indigenous territories are the strongest barrier to deforestation! For example, a 2022 study found that rates of deforestation in areas inhabited by Indigenous people were three to four times lower than neighboring lands.⁶



Watch Nixiwaka's [testimony](#)

The Yanomami, who we've focused on, are one of about 400 unique Indigenous peoples who together make up about 1.5 million people living in the Amazon. Meet Nixiwaka Yawanawá from the Yawanawá people. With over 1,000 members, the Yawanawá live on – and protect – nearly half a million acres of the Brazilian Amazon – an area as large as the UK's Lake District, the country's biggest national park!

⁶ Source: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/08/indigenous-people-protecting-planet/>



- Why is the Amazon rainforest so important for Nixiwaka and his people?
- What does he say about the importance of money in the rainforest?
- How do his people treat and think about the Amazon rainforest and why?
- Based on Nixiwaka's video and your knowledge of the Yanomami people, why do you think the rainforest is safest when in Indigenous care?

Watch these timelapse videos of the Baka, Cameroon and the Awá, Brazil

What makes these practices ideal examples of sustainable living? How do Baka and Awá techniques for making tents and backpacks differ from our own methods? Do you think you could make these with plants from your local area?



Consider these statements below from Indigenous peoples across the world



What do the statements reveal about Indigenous worldviews? To what extent do they align with your perspective? What can we learn from them?

“We are nothing without the forest, and the forest is nothing without us.” Adivasi, India

“We are children of trees.” Chenchu, India

“Food, life, health all come from that forest. If we were to give up the forest, we'd be sacrificing our children's lives, our parents' lives, our own lives.” Baka, Republic of Congo

“We don't think of ourselves as better or more important than nature. It's a relationship of equal to equal. We think of nature as our mother, imagine that!” Guna, Panamá

"We know every tree and water hole and corner of this land – everything has a name. We know this land as you know your children. We say, 'This is my son and these are my grandchildren.' That is how we know this place." Gana, Gwi and Tsila, Botswana

Going above and beyond to protect the planet



If you search in Google who “the world’s most important environmentalists” are, you’ll find names like David Attenborough, Greta Thunberg, and Jane Goodall. But the truth is, vital environmentalist work of Indigenous peoples often goes unnoticed. They risk their lives to defend their lands from activities like illegal mining and deforestation, safeguarding the planet for everyone.

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami

Davi – whose words you’ve seen throughout this resource – is one of many Indigenous leaders. A shaman and spokesman for the Yanomami people, he campaigned for over 20 years to protect the Yanomami territory...and succeeded. Thanks to Davi, an area of the Amazon bigger than Portugal, was officially recognized as Yanomami land and placed under the protection of the world’s best conservationists – Indigenous peoples! Davi has received international prizes for his work, spoken at the United Nations and met with presidents and royalty across the world. Despite facing threats, Davi remains devoted to his people and protecting the rainforest.

Learn more about Survival International’s work and how to promote Indigenous peoples’ rights

We love hearing from you and your students!

- Does your class have questions on this topic? Would they like to have a brief virtual meeting with a Survival International staff member?
- Do you want to have a Survival International staff member speak at a school assembly?
- Would you, your colleagues, or other educators you know, like to receive more Survival International educational materials? We have materials suitable for groups aged 5 to 18 years.
- Would you like your school to be involved in supporting Survival International’s work in partnership with Indigenous peoples?

If the answer is yes, then please get in touch with our team at
getinvolved@survivalinternational.org

We can’t wait to hear from you!