

The Suruwaha

Who are the Suruwaha?

The Suruwaha are a relatively isolated tribe living in Brazil's Amazon rainforest. They number about 140 people.

They are probably the descendants of a much larger tribe of several thousand people who were decimated by disease and violent encounters with rubber tappers and other outsiders in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The few survivors appear to have sought refuge and isolation in remote forests where they remained uncontacted until the 1970s.

Their land has been officially mapped out and protected by FUNAI, the Brazilian government's Indian Affairs Department. Nevertheless they remain a vulnerable people.

Where do they live?

The Suruwaha live in the tropical rainforests of Amazonas state in the north-western Brazilian Amazon, in the Purus river basin.

How do they live?

The Suruwaha live in large conical thatched houses in one community.

Largely self sufficient, they hunt game, fish, and cultivate fruit and vegetables in their gardens. Like many Amazon tribes, they have extensive botanical knowledge and use 'curare' poison for hunting, and 'timbo', a woody vine which is pulped and placed in streams, causing the fish to float to the surface where they can be collected. They make their own hammocks and clay pots.

What problems do they face?

The Suruwaha have been targeted by evangelical missionaries from an organization called JOCUM - Youth with a Mission. The missionaries say that Suruwaha must be taken out of the community for medical care, and as a means of saving them from infanticide.

The missionaries are also trying to push for a dangerous new law to be passed- 'Muwaji's Law'.