

We Live in the Amazon Rainforest, the Lungs of the World

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We live in the Amazon rainforest, the lungs of the world. We have our own culture, which is threatened by the aftermath of the Spanish conquest and by western culture. We struggle to restore, to revalidate, the sense of our own worth.

For us, culture is language, and land is our existence. When the land is destroyed, we cease being Shuar and Achuar. We declare our presence and strengthen our alliances with non-natives to continue to survive on this planet.

For us there are three earth spaces: underground, where a Shuar group lives; where we live; and above, where yet another Shuar group lives. We have learned this from our ancestors. Therefore, we defend the underground and the above, the air space, because our family dwells there.

We value the land because it sustains us. We want the land because we want to live on it, not commercialize it. We want it to cultivate and to give it its worth, not a price. We have no other space where we can go. People cannot understand because they think of land as a commercial enterprise, something to divide and sell. We perceive land as a collective entity. We may be the only native group in the world which is all related. I have family wherever I go. We have organized a federation. Land must be global because we are all one family.

From the time of our ancestors, our warrior parents, the Shuar woman has been a major source of strength and support. She implored the gods to protect the warrior; she encouraged the warrior to go to the waterfalls in search of the *arutam* spirits to gain his valor. We want our sisters to remain in their communities to cultivate their lands and raise their animals. Women will be able to have their savings and get credit from the federation. We will fight for real change in our community and the equality between men and women.

Our time is ours, and we depend on no one.

We educate our children in our own land, in our community, and prepare them in order that they will always return. That is preparing the future. Other places have witnessed the flight of native professionals. It is a luxury to be in New York, Frankfurt or Paris. But it is a greater luxury to be a professional who defends the rights of your people, defends your own existence. That is why we return and we will continue returning to our communities.

The Shuar Federation is a regional organization and co-founder of the national organization of indigenous organizations. Within three years, we hope to solve the problems with land litigation. We need to expand our programs. But now there is confusion and we need time. Governments do not provide much support to native communities.

We need to defend the people that live in the rainforest, people who are not graduates of the university, but who have maintained the Amazons for thousands and thousands of years. We must defend people, and not the animals or the trees or the underground resources. People know and understand the beauty and richness of the Amazons. They know how to survive in the rainforest. We need to provide them with technical and financial assistance and strengthen programs to prevent their death.

We ask the government: what will you do about the pollution of our rivers, about the destruction of our forests? The reforestation program is ambiguous, political. We need more than rice, some clothes and corrugated roofs. We need training for our people, strengthening of our programs in aviation, education, topography, civil registry, health and all the programs organized by the Shuar Federation. We need to defend our position and continue fighting.

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