

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91007395>

National Public Radio (EUA)

## Brazilian Tribes Say Dam Threatens Way of Life

by Julie McCarthy

**Listen Now** [8 min 54 sec] add to playlist



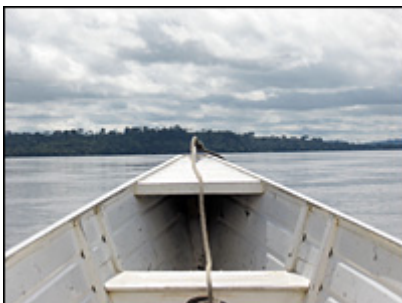
Sue Cunningham

The proposed dam on the idyllic Xingu has raised debate over how to balance Brazil's energy needs with environmental concerns and the traditional way of life for the country's indigenous tribes. [Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust](#)



Julie McCarthy/NPR

The 1,200-mile-long Xingu River is home to indigenous tribes, small farmers and fishermen.



Julie McCarthy/NPR

A boat ride down the Xingu reveals little of man's imprint in this Amazon region.



Sue Cunningham

Paulo Fernando Rezende, a representative of Eletrobras, tends to his wounds after being attacked by people opposed to the Belo Monte dam Electrobras is proposing to build on the Xingu River. [Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust](#)



Sue Cunningham

Bishop of Xingu Dom Erwin says he believes the indigenous people ultimately will prevail in the battle over the dam project. [Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust](#)

*Weekend Edition Saturday, May 31, 2008* · The waters of the Amazon rainforest are fast becoming ground zero in the battle between development and the environment.

The Brazilian government wants to harness the hydroelectric power potential of the rainforest's mighty rivers to generate energy for South America's biggest economy.

But the ancestral inhabitants of the Amazon argue that the ebb and flow of their lives depends on the natural resources from those waterways. They fiercely

oppose plans to build what would be the world's third-largest dam on the Xingu River in the Amazonian state of Para, Brazil.

### **Political Storm Gathers**

Traveling down the remote, pristine Xingu River is a bit like scouting Eden. Lush green forests that stretch heavenward cradle the banks. Water birds lead the morning chorus. Hawks draw lazy circles in the sky. Man's imprint is difficult to see while you watch the pink-blue horizon bleed into gray as the Amazon marshals a storm.

A political storm is also gathering over the planned construction of a hydroelectric dam near the mouth of the 1,200-mile long Xingu, which spills into the Amazon River.

Analysts say the government views the Amazon as Brazil's energy salvation. With major rivers farther south already dammed, the government says the \$6 billion hydroelectric plant — known as the Belo Monte project — is indispensable to propelling energy-hungry Brazil to its next level of development.

### **Tribes Lodge Protest**

But some 1,000 Indians from diverse tribes converged recently on the small port of Altamira to protest against the damming of the river in a five-day event called "Xingu Encounter 2008."

The Indians and their allies say the proposed 11,000-megawatt dam would flood more than 100,000 acres of land and destroy a way of life for thousands of indigenous families, farmers and fishermen.

Two decades earlier, they mobilized in the same spot to defeat a series of proposed dams. Anthropologist Terence Turner, emeritus professor at Cornell University, has spent 45 years studying the ancient tribes of the Xingu River and their recurring drama.

"It's like a Dracula movie. Every 20 years or so, it surges up out of the coffin. You have to drive the stake back through the thing and make it go away again. But it never really goes away. It keeps coming back," he says.

Glenn Switkes, of the environmental group International Rivers, says the Belo Monte project is "the apple of the government's eye."

"It's where all the money is going to be made. It's going to be the biggest infrastructure project in Brazil for the next 25 years," he says.

But Switkes also says the Belo Monte dam would not be viable because the Xingu River has seasonal low water levels that would interrupt the power plant.

For three to four months of the year, he says, "the turbines at Belo Monte would virtually grind to a halt. So then the question arises: Is this going to be the only large dam on the Xingu?"

Sue Cunningham is intimately familiar with the attitude that the people of the Xingu River Basin have toward the dam. A trustee of the U.K.-based Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust and a photographer, Cunningham recently journeyed the length of the Xingu River.

"I had a number of experiences in the 48 villages of women coming up to me with tears streaming down their face — totally naked, painted black, aggressive and nasty, saying, 'Who are you? Please, whatever you are doing here — tell those people not to construct the dams. Where will I run with my children? Where will I find food? What boats will take me where?'" Cunningham says.

### **Anger Boils Over into Violence**

Streaked black, Kayapo tribe leader Tuira could have been one of those women. At the mass gathering opposing the dam, she wields a machete and a sharp tongue.

"You've come here to make this dam, and you think you can just push us aside. But I am not afraid!" she cries. "I am not a child or an orphan. And together we are strong and we can fight back."

Her warning foreshadows the reception for the representative from the state's electric power enterprise, Eletrobras, which is planning the dam. Invited to speak, Paulo Fernando Rezende confidently strolls before the cavernous gymnasium — short-sleeves in a sea of painted chests. His Power Point presentation flashing, he extols the virtues of the Belo Monte dam.

Attempting to reassure his skeptical audience, Rezende tells them: "The National Indian Foundation will fully participate in the studies affecting the indigenous lands."

But the foundation formed to safeguard the Indians' rights is mired in allegations of corruption, including accusations this week that some of its officials had taken bribes in another case. The distrustful crowd roars back its ridicule. Undeterred, the Eletrobras representative implores: "If we stop this hydroelectric plant, we stop Brazil. Who has the courage to say these dams are bad?"

A leader of the Movement of Dam Affected People, for one.

Roquivan Alves Silva takes the microphone and declares: "If necessary, I will make war to protect the Xingu and the people of the entire region."

Moments later, the Indians rise in unison. A mix of warriors and women moves menacingly across the room toward Rezende. Then suddenly they're on him.

Machetes and sticks flailing, they push Rezende to the floor, poking him with their weapons. The warriors rip his shirt to shreds and carve a deep gash in his right arm. Blood pooling on the floor, Dom Erwin, the Catholic Bishop of Xingu, steps in. The gymnasium hangs suspended between fear and euphoria.

Chief Tabata, whose tribe lives in the Xingu National Park in the state of Mato Grosso, says he feels the Eletrobras representative lied.

He says the Paranatinga II dam on the upper Xingu has already changed the flow of water and damaged the spawning ground for fish. The Indians attacked, he says, because their very survival is under attack.

"We have to hurt them. They weren't respecting the Indians. ... That's our fight. I want the people, the white people to understand why the Indians are so angry," he says.

The injured engineer from Eletrobras says he doesn't plan to press charges. The company declined repeated requests for an interview.

### **Who Is the Amazon's Protector?**

Xingu Bishop Dom Erwin is a tireless advocate of indigenous rights. He has not lost his belief that ultimately the Indians will prevail.

"In Brazil we have an expression: Hope is the last to die," he says.

Hope aside, Chief Pirakuma Yawalapiti says a world increasingly preoccupied with the environment ought to consider something else.

"We are the ones preserving nature," he says, "We are the ones safeguarding the water, the fish and the land. We are defending the Amazon."

### **Related NPR Stories**

- Nov. 5, 2007 [Amazon Fire Wars Exacerbate Global Warming](#)
- Aug. 29, 2007 [Brazil River Dispute Highlights Larger Issue](#)
- July 9, 2007 [Unlikely Allies Battle Deforestation in the Amazon](#)