

Encontro Xingu '08



Day 5: Riverside Departure 27 May 2008



Participants began to assemble at the riverside from 7:30 with the arrival of buses loaded with rural workers and small farmers from the surrounding area. Many had started out in the small hours just to attend this last day; others had been in Altamira for some days. By the time the Indians arrived, more than an hour later, the non-Indians were in full swing. They formed an arena surrounded by banners, and several community leaders made impassioned speeches.



An unexpected arrival was the BBC's Bruce Parry. He is in the Amazon making a series with Indus Films, following the river from its source in the Peruvian Andes to its mouth. Cameraman Keith's video camera simply dwarfed everyone else's, as did the Indus crew of seven. Bruce was not here specifically to cover the Encontro Xingu, but such a unique gathering of Indians and rural people was an opportunity the team could not resist.

They seemed bowled over by the sheer scale of the event,



but confused about why the Brazilian Government had decided not to send any senior representatives to hear the Indians' case.

The Kayapo arrived in a column, dancing and chanting. Keith, who is very tall, was surrounded by the warriors as they swept into the arena, circling in the traditional way. He relished the experience and emerged beaming.



Instinctively sensing another photo opportunity, the Indians rushed into the water, making symbolic use of the river to highlight their relationship with it. They circled, splashing defiantly, to make the point that this river is sacred to them, and that they will do whatever is required to defend it.

Bruce Parry interviewed the bishop, Dom Erwin Kräutler, at length. His probing questions displayed a good grasp of the situation; he clearly does his research well. Bruce later told us that he has been in South America since October last year, constantly travelling without a break, though other members of the crew have come and gone. Knowing the strain this brings, I have developed a quiet respect for the man.



After the incident on the second day the police presence at the Encontro had been stepped up. Riot police with machine guns, tear gas canisters and riot shields were a constant presence. But they behaved impeccably, staying well back and keeping a low profile.

Here on the riverbank, I noticed one heavily-armed policeman shyly asking a Kayapo chief if he could take a souvenir photo with him!



The presence of so many policemen, though understandable, was proved completely unnecessary. Except for those two or three minutes on the second day of the event when a symbolic gesture went wrong, the entire week passed without even a hint of aggression.



During the week an intricate body paint design on an arm has become a fashion essential in Altamira. The Indian women have been doing a brisk trade outside the hall, with a line of people waiting their turn to be painted.

What was noticeable at this event was the level of mutual support between the Indians, members of the local Altamira community and local rural people. What was noticeable was a powerful exchange of culture between the two groups, who could be seen chatting, children with chiefs, women with women, men with warriors. What was noticeable was a sense of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.



As the final ceremony drew to a close, the Indians boarded their buses, heading back to their villages. Several buses left direct from the riverside; those travelling further returned to the camp-site for one last good meal before they began their arduous two- or three-day bus journeys. For many, it will be several days or even weeks before they arrive home.



With the Indians gone, we expected to find the town returning to normal. But late in the morning on Saturday our attention was drawn by a banner-wielding procession of young people.

“What’s that about?” we asked a supermarket worker. “Belo Monte.” “For or against?” “It’s against. Practically everyone here is against. No-one wants the dam.”

<http://pa.photoshelter.com/c/scp/gallery-show/G0000iTSB2h1wHVw/>

© Patrick Cunningham

Day 4: Brazilian and International Law, Cultural Respect

27 May 2008 · No Comments

My good intentions to upload to this blog each day were thwarted by the failure of the local internet. This post covers the fourth day of the Encontro Xingu.



Day 4 saw legal matters discussed at length, covering the right of indigenous people to be consulted, and actions being taken as a result of the failure of Eletrobras to do so.

It included reference to the United Nations Convention 169, which relates to the rights of indigenous people to live and develop as differentiated peoples, in accordance with their own standards. More recently, Brazil heavily supported the United Nation’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



Brazil joined another 142 nations of the world in voting for the declaration. Piragibe dos Santos Tarrago, Brazil's representative, speaking on the day the Declaration was approved, said that Brazil welcomed the text. He said that Brazil's indigenous peoples were crucial to the development of society at every level, and that Brazil would underscore that the exercise of the rights of indigenous peoples was consistent with the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the States in which they resided.

At the same time, States should always bear in mind their duty to protect the rights and identity of their indigenous peoples, he added.

Displacing indigenous communities from their long-established locations may appear benign, even on occasions beneficial.



But those people have established a complex system of interaction with their environment. Their nutrition is based on fishing and hunting, which provide most of their protein, planting and harvesting, which provide most of their starch and carbohydrate, and collecting from the wild, which provides other essential nutrients including trace elements and vitamins.



Their relationship with the forest doesn't stop there. They also harvest materials for building their houses and making tools and cultural items, such as body decorations, baskets and craft-work. They collect plants, roots, leaves, fruits, nuts and tree bark from which they make medicines. Many of these are found at some distance from the village, necessitating long expeditions to collect them; but the Indians have passed down the knowledge of their locations and uses through many generations, and they have become integral parts of their cultural heritage, and their intellectual property.

Many villages are strategically placed to take advantage of more than one kind of ecosystem. For example, the community may make use of materials from the rainforest and from drier cerrados areas. They may fish for some species in the river, and others in the lakes. What most indigenous communities have in common, which continues to the present day, is that they do not rely on money to provide for their everyday needs. Money is still alien to them - they call it 'dead leaves' - and is only used to purchase the occasional manufactured items they use.



If you take this community and uproot the people from their location at the side of a flowing river and relocate them in another place, their entire cultural heritage becomes irrelevant to their everyday lives. They no longer know where to find the right kinds of food, they can no longer treat the diseases that were conquered by their ancestors generations in the past, and they can no longer house or feed themselves. They become reliant on food or money provided by the mainstream society, which may be provided only for a short time, and will always provide only the most basic level of nutrition and subsistence. Housing is constructed for them using alien materials, and is usually built in an alien form, further distancing them from their way of life and cultural self-expression.

Even if the community is not physically removed, it can still suffer cultural debasement because of changes in the environment imposed, deliberately or unthinkingly, by people outside of the indigenous reserve. This is the situation in the upper Xingu, where the dams on the headwaters threaten the food supplies of the fourteen tribes living in the Xingu Indigenous Park.



This action can only be described as cultural annihilation. It is diametrically at odds to Brazil's words and commitments as expressed in the United Nations Declaration. There can simply be no justification, no explanation, no cost-benefit analysis which can justify such a complete abrogation of the country's commitments, freely entered into and enthusiastically endorsed. Back in the hall where the Encontro Xingu was drawing towards its close, when the speakers had each given their presentations, the Indians took control of the meeting. Each chief in turn came to the table, explained the source of his authority, and stated his community's position. Without exception, the statement said, clearly and forcefully, "We do not want the government to build any dams on the Xingu."



The presentations were calm and dignified. Each chief spoke briefly, directly to the Public Prosecutor. Some spoke in Portuguese, some spoke through an interpreter. Many asked him for his help. Some spoke about the Brazilian constitution; some reminded him that they too are Brazilians, in fact that they are the first Brazilians. Each chief then shook the Public Prosecutor's hand and thanked him.

They demonstrated that they respect and accept the Brazilian mainstream culture. They even went as far as to sing the Brazilian National Anthem in the Kayapo Language. Now the Brazilian mainstream must show them that this respect is mutual.

The Day 4 picture gallery is here:

<http://pa.photoshelter.com/c/scp/gallery-show/G0000dJRsGDf1JTQ/>

© Patrick Cunningham

Day 3; Time to Reflect 24 May 2008 •

Because of the continuing Internet limitations, photos from the last three days of the Encontro will not be uploaded until Sunday or Monday.



In the afternoon, we visited the seminary where the Indians are being housed during the conference. Tribes which traditionally were at war with each other were huddled together in deep discussion, preparing a joint declaration. Where twenty years ago they were armed with war clubs and machetes, today they wield pens and paper, video cameras and voice recorders.

Speaking in Portuguese so that all the tribes could understand, several of the younger leaders made impassioned yet articulate presentations, demonstrating a sophisticated



understanding of the economics and politics surrounding the subject. Professor Oswaldo Sevá explained the implications of the construction of dams in greater detail to a silent audience. At the end of his presentation he was regaled with probing questions before being awarded a Kayapo feather decoration, indicating his acceptance as an honorary member of the tribe.

As the discussions proceeded, I had time to reflect on some of the things said during the three days. I realised that, whatever the economic or political pressures driving the Belo Monte project, to move forward with it would be both politically and economically perilous.



“If the government of President Lula tries to start building Belo Monte, we Kayapo will join together and go to war,” said one chief.

And he means it. If the bulldozers move in, our television screens will be filled with images of Brazilian police firing gas canisters and bullets at angry rows of black-painted Indians. When the first Indian dies, there will be a huge international outcry at the heavy-handedness of the Brazilian authorities, and revulsion from the people of Brazil.



Later, the chiefs of all the tribes had an audience with the Federal judge who is hearing a case which has paralysed the environmental assessment. In a deposition, they made absolutely clear their opposition to the dams, stating that they would under no circumstances agree to the construction of any dam on the Xingu, citing the irrelevance of monetary compensation for the destruction of their culture and lifestyles.

The rights of Indians are enshrined in the Brazilian constitution of 1988, which says, “Indians shall have their social organization, customs, languages, creeds and traditions recognized, as well as their original rights to the lands they traditionally occupy, it being incumbent upon the Union to demarcate them, protect and ensure respect for all of their property.” It is up to the people and the government of Brazil to uphold their constitution, and hold all of the Indians of the Xingu, their cultures, their ways of life and their lands, inviolate.

The gallery of pictures for day 3:

<http://pa.photoshelter.com/c/scp/gallery-show/G000019QZ8dN3oRg/>

© Patrick Cunningham

Day 3; Hydroelectric Dams on the Headwaters

24 May 2008 · [No Comments](#)

I'm uploading this on Saturday, after the closing of the event, because the internet connection has been interrupted throughout the last three days of the event, preventing us from uploading images or text.



After yesterday's dramatic climax, this morning has been much calmer, but no less significant. Yesterday focussed on the massive Belo Monte project; today's discussion related to the smaller but arguably no less destructive proposals to build dams on the headwaters. Six dams are planned for the five major headwaters of the Xingu. One of these, Paranatinga II, is under construction and nearing completion. It has been the cause of stormy confrontations between the Indians of the Xingu Indigenous Park, especially the Ikpeng, and employees of the construction



company. Although these schemes are intended to produce electricity to feed local demand only, and will create quite small reservoirs, they affect the ecosystem of the whole length of the Xingu. Many fish species migrate during their lifetimes, returning to spawning grounds in the headwaters to lay their eggs but living most of their lives further downstream. These fish are the principal protein source for the Indians of the Xingu Indigenous Park, who are amongst the most traditional in their lifestyles.

They hunt very little, and anyway they report that hunting has been less and less successful as their reserves are rapidly becoming isolated islands in the sea of soya which surrounds them.



Fish stocks are already under pressure because of alterations to the riverine ecology resulting from land use changes. Unlike the natural cerrados forests which used to occupy the headwaters, the soya fields do not provide a steady, balanced drip feed of nutrients into the river.

Instead, the increasingly intense rains wash quantities of agrochemicals into the rivers which enter the Park. Some are straightforward toxins, killing fish and microfauna. Others are artificial fertilisers which favour specific plant species, causing changes in the food supply chain and destabilising the whole ecosystem.



In addition to this, the soil of the soya fields has nothing to bind it and washes down into the river, turning the once-clear water into a muddy soup, making it impossible for the Indians to fish using traditional methods such as bows and arrows.

The hydroelectric companies propose to include 'fish ladders' to allow the fish to continue their annual migration, but ecologists say that the plan is ill-conceived and will be ineffective. Only a tiny proportion of the fish will be able to make the journey; many will die in the hot pools which will form the ladder; others simply are unable to negotiate the journey.

Any young fish which do hatch in the headwaters face an even greater problem in finding their way downstream. There is no way to direct them away from the turbine intakes, and they will become minced fish-meal as they pass through the turbines.

The gallery of pictures for day 3:

<http://pa.photoshelter.com/c/scp/gallery-show/G000019QZ8dN3oRg/>

© Patrick Cunningham

Encontro Xingu Day 2 21 May 2008 •



Indians continued to arrive throughout the day. There are now over 600 people from 35 ethnic groups, including old friends from the Xingu Indigenous Park. The morning saw a review of the 1989 gathering, and an emotional speech from Marcelo Kamaiura, who talked about proposals for six so-called 'small' dams on the headwaters of the river in Mato Grosso State. His impassioned call for unity of all the people, Indian and non-Indian alike, the length of the river, drew huge applause. Riverside dwellers and small-scale family farmers reinforced this call. The afternoon began with the arrival of a few new communities, each of which made a



stirring entry, singing and dancing their way into the hall. Professor Oswaldo Seva, who lectures in engineering at Campinas University and has a long and detailed understanding about the history of the several previous attempts to dam the Xingu explained the extent of flooding local people could expect. He highlighted many shortcomings, from the engineering, economic, social and environmental perspectives. In plain language he detailed which areas would be flooded and explained the reasons why it is highly likely that Eletrobras will not stop at a single dam, which on its own would not be viable.



Next it was the turn of the Eletrobras representative, Paulo Fernando Vieira Souto Rezende. He used a bewildering series of charts, lists, statistics and maps in what appeared to be an attempt to confuse everybody in the room. In a haranguing presentation, he seemed intent on talking over the heads of his entire audience. His approach did not go down well with the Indians, who became increasingly preoccupied as he continued. It went down no better with the small farmers and riverside dwellers, who broke into a fit of spontaneous booing and chanting in opposition to the proposals. The Indians continued to listen in silence until he had finished.



A few minutes later, the Indians suddenly rose up in unison, chanting and dancing across the room. A mixed group of warriors and women, some with babies and small children, approached the table where Rezende was sitting, chanting and brandishing their war clubs and machetes. Rezende was pushed to the floor and the Indians, their anger patent, poked at him with their weapons. His shirt was torn from his back, and he received a deep cut in his upper arm. The police and security guards failed to respond, and it was left to the bravery of some of the organisers, who put themselves between the Indians and Rezende to protect him, receiving symbolic threats themselves. The episode was over quickly, and order was



rapidly restored.

This was not an attempt to inflict serious harm, and it is much more likely that Rezende's injury was the result of an unlucky or over-excited jab. The Indians accused the unfortunate Eletrobras representative of lying. They were carrying war clubs and long machetes, and Rezende could easily have suffered far worse. The Indians were trying to make their point and felt they had no other option, feeling powerless in the face of this serious threat to their culture, their way of life and their homes.



Afterwards, Professor Sevá said, “From the point of view of the Indians in this country, they have the right to five hundred times this level of violence because of what they have suffered at the hands of the white man. But it is a pity that it has taken this outbreak of violence to call the attention of the world to the plight of these people.”

Non-Indian organisers of the event were shocked, but pointed out the underlying cause of the violence. Glenn Switkes of International Rivers said, “This is a very regrettable event, but it is a sign of the level of anxiety and serious concern that the indigenous people have, facing the prospect of dams on the Xingu.”

Tomorrow should be a little more peaceful, though discussion of the 'small' hydroelectric dams on the headwaters will see the Ikpeng and others whose lives and food sources will be damaged by these schemes put up a heated debate; the Ikpeng have in the past occupied the construction site of Paranatinga II, the first 'small' dam, which today is nearing completion, and have taken hostages on more than one occasion.

Today's pictures:

<http://archive.scphotographic.com/c/scp/gallery-show/G0000k2roxpgaD.I>

©Patrick Cunningham

Encontro Xingu: Day 1 20 May 2008 •



There were problems along the way. Buses broke down, bridges collapsed - one bus was even shot at! Boat engines failed. Some groups have not arrived yet. Those from furthest away, the Xavante and the representatives from the Xingu Indigenous Park were delayed en route; they should arrive today.

Throughout the day, the buses trundled the 8 kilometres of pitted and rutted dirt road from Altamira to the seminary at Bethania to end their journeys, many of which had lasted for several days.

The Indians emerged from the buses painted and ready for action, surprisingly lively after their arduous journeys. After a short break to bathe and eat they were off again, back into Altamira for the opening ceremony of the Encontro Xingu.

Wave after wave of colourful, singing, dancing troupes of Indians, each from a different village or area, entered the gymnasium venue to cheers and applause from the waiting throng of non-Indian supporters and well-wishers.



Dom Erwin Kräutler, the Bishop of the Xingu, opened the meeting, introducing each Indian group: Kayapo, Asurini, Arawete, Parakana, Panara, Arara. they were followed by people from the rural movements in the area, small farmers, extractivists, and rural workers. Each spoke with passion; each reinforced the united view; your dams are not wanted here, the Xingu River is our home, our soul, our livelihood.



The singing and the dancing gave way to talking. Some of the Indian chiefs spoke in their own languages, but many gave articulate presentations in Portuguese. They even sang the Brazilian national anthem in Kayapo, to emphasise that these are Brazilians, that the Indian nations are an integral part - the original part - of the Brazilian nation.

Tuira Kayapo, a forceful woman warrior, brandished her machete and spoke forcefully of her worries for the future of her children and grandchildren. In 1989, her image circulated the world when she approached the representative of Eletrobras, threatening him symbolically by touching his cheeks with her machete. In 2008 she is still



threatening, and still angry at the idea that her culture and her livelihood will be forcibly swept away from by the Brazilian government in its thirst for electricity, in the name of Progress.

Today, Tuesday, will see the Indians confronting the representatives of Eletrobras, the national electricity company who are promoting the Belo Monte dam this time. They have been heavily criticised by Brazilian scientists and activists, with support from international campaigners who see the local people disempowered in the face of the mighty Brazilian government and construction giants.

© Patrick Cunningham

[Welcome and Background](#) **19 May 2008** • [1 Comment](#)

Welcome to the Encontro Xingu '08 blog. I will be writing news from the event as it develops, uploading daily reports from Altamira.



For anyone who has come to this blog by chance, first a little background. This blog is specifically to cover a large gathering of tribal indigenous people and small farmers in the Amazon 'frontier' town of Altamira. The event will see a thousand Indians, in war-paint and feathers, gathered together with riverside dwellers and small farmers to show their opposition to a series of hydroelectric dams which threaten to destroy their lives and huge swathes of the Amazon environment. The largest of these is Belo Monte, which will be the third largest in the world if it goes ahead.

Brazil is a fast developing country which is in many ways an example to the rest of the world.

It has set aside almost 30% of its Amazon territory as protected areas, a combination of indigenous reserves, national parks, national forests, biological reserves, extractive reserves, etc. Excluding emissions from land use change it produces a very modest level of greenhouse gases per head of population, helped partly by a longstanding reliance on alcohol produced from sugar cane to fuel its road vehicles.



But when you add the emissions from the destruction of the forests, Brazil rises to become the fourth worst polluter per head of population in the world. After several years of decreasing deforestation, 2007 saw a dramatic rise, and commentators expect 2008 to be substantially worse still.

Brazil has recently discovered huge offshore oil deposits, but it used to be thought to have very little oil so successive governments have sought to reduce its dependence on oil imports by promoting alternative sources of energy.

One of the sources most favoured has long been hydroelectricity, provided mainly by huge dams like Itaipu, Balbina and Tucuruí. Although today these supply nearly 80% of Brazil's electricity, they have attracted substantial criticism.



Each of these huge schemes has come at huge environmental and social cost. The first was Itaipu, on the border with Argentina and Paraguay. It destroyed a beautiful series of waterfalls called 'Sete Quedas' (Seven Falls). Itaipu flooded 1,350 square kilometres and displaced 10,000 families.

The development of Balbina was far more destructive. Here, the valley was wide and shallow, and the dam flooded a huge area, 2,360 square kilometres, including significant parts of the demarcated reserve of the Waimiri-Atroari, who received little by way of compensation. The shallow reservoir has since been shown to emit huge amounts of methane and nitrous oxide, both very powerful greenhouse gases. It has been estimated that shallow dams in tropical areas produce between four and ten times as much greenhouse gas as would be produced in generating the same amount of electricity from fossil fuels.

In the case of Tucuruí, the closest large dam to Belo Monte, the electricity company failed to clear the vegetation before the reservoir was flooded, leading to even higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, the water became acidic as the vegetation rotted, resulting in the death of huge numbers of fish and problems caused by corrosion of the turbines.

In social terms, Tucuruí has been a disaster. Thousands of small farmers were displaced as the water rose, and twenty years on many are still fighting for promised compensation which has never been paid.



Two Indian tribes were forced to move from their ancestral lands and continue to this day to suffer the effects of the move. Being unable to live in the traditional way, they are now dependent on subsidies from the electricity company and handouts from the government. But monetary payments can never compensate them for the permanent destruction of their traditional lifestyles and

the decimation of their culture. These once proud and self-sufficient people have been all but destroyed.

Now the government and the state electricity company want to bring the same chaos and destruction to the Xingu, one of the last intact riverine ecosystems in the Amazon.

Plans to dam the Xingu go back to the 1980s, when the dam was ironically called Karaoari, after an Indian village which would have been drowned under the rising water. Then the plan was dropped when the World Bank withdrew funding on environmental and social grounds, following a demonstration similar to the one which is happening this week.

© Patrick Cunningham

→ [1 Comment](#) **Categories:** [News](#)

Tagged: [Altamira](#), [Amazon](#), [Belo Monte](#), [Brazil](#), [dam](#), [dams](#), [development](#), [Eletrobras](#), [Eletronorte](#), [hydroelectric](#), [Hydroelectricity](#), [Indians](#), [indigenous people](#), [power sector](#), [Xingu](#), [Xingu River](#)

- **Search It!**

- **Recent Entries**

- [Day 5: Riverside Departure](#)5.27
- [Day 4: Brazilian and International Law, Cultural Respect](#)5.27
- [Day 3: Time to Reflect](#)5.24
- [Day 3: Hydroelectric Dams on the Headwaters](#)5.24
- [Encontro Xingu Day 2](#)5.21
- [Encontro Xingu: Day 1](#)5.20
- [Welcome and Background](#)5.19

- **Links**

- [Heart of Brazil Expedition](#)
- [IPCST - Indigenous Peoples' Cultural Support Trust](#)
- [WordPress.com](#)
- [WordPress.org](#)

[Blog at WordPress.com](#). Theme: Cutline by [Chris Pearson](#).