

# **Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust**

## **Heart of Brazil Expedition**

### **PRESS RELEASE**

## **Indians Rally to Fight Dam Proposal in the Amazon**

The Indians of the Xingu River in the Brazilian Amazon are preparing to don their feathers and warpaint to demonstrate their opposition to the Brazilian government's latest hydroelectric scheme for the Xingu. This will be the largest gathering of the tribes since 1989, when Sting and the Body Shop's Anita Roddick were there to support them.

"Over a thousand Indians will be there to show their frustration that these plans have resurfaced. An earlier scheme was defeated after the 1989 meeting, when the World Bank withdrew funding because of social and environmental concerns," said Glenn Switkes of campaigning group International Rivers. "Today, the environmental case against the dams is even stronger. Recent research shows that these schemes are bad for the local environment and bad for the global climate."

The Indians will join *caboclo* extractivists, rural settlers and local people in the logging and cattle town of Altamira, from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Their discussions will include scientists, technical experts, representatives of international organisations and public officials during a high-profile three-day event.

Their objective is to stop all hydroelectric schemes on the Xingu. Belo Monte is the biggest; if it were to be built, it would be the world's third largest, with an installed capacity of 11.181 megawatts. But independent engineers claim the dam will be one of the least efficient in the world, generating little or no electricity during the dry months from July to November.

Takakudjy Kayapo, an elder, said "Tell your country that they should not send money to help the Brazilian government destroy this forest. It is money from abroad that supports the invasion of our land, that is making it possible for them to build this dam. Please make them stop sending it."

As well as this mega project, there are a dozen so-called 'small' dams planned or under construction on the headwaters of the river. Although not on the scale of Belo Monte, these are as much of a threat because they interfere with the sources of the river, blocking fish migration routes, drastically changing the chemistry of the river, and creating sediment pollution.

The dams threaten the livelihood and cultures of all the Indian tribes of the Xingu. They will affect over 10,000 Indians. Their many varied cultures, which have withstood life in this extreme environment for millennia, will be wiped out in the name of progress; but this is a progress which also endangers climate change and the civilisation of the whole world.

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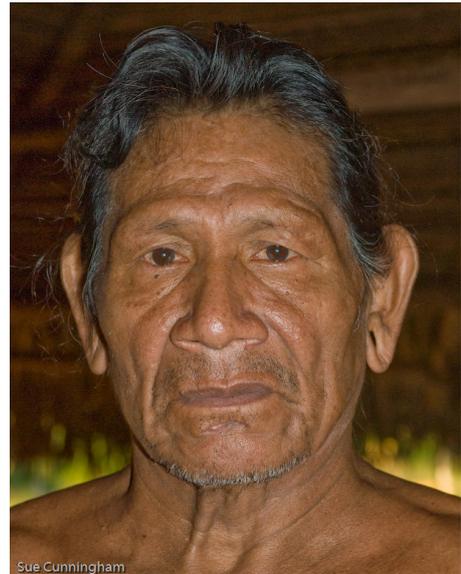
© Sue Cunningham  
Kayapo warriors at the 1989 Altamira protest gathering



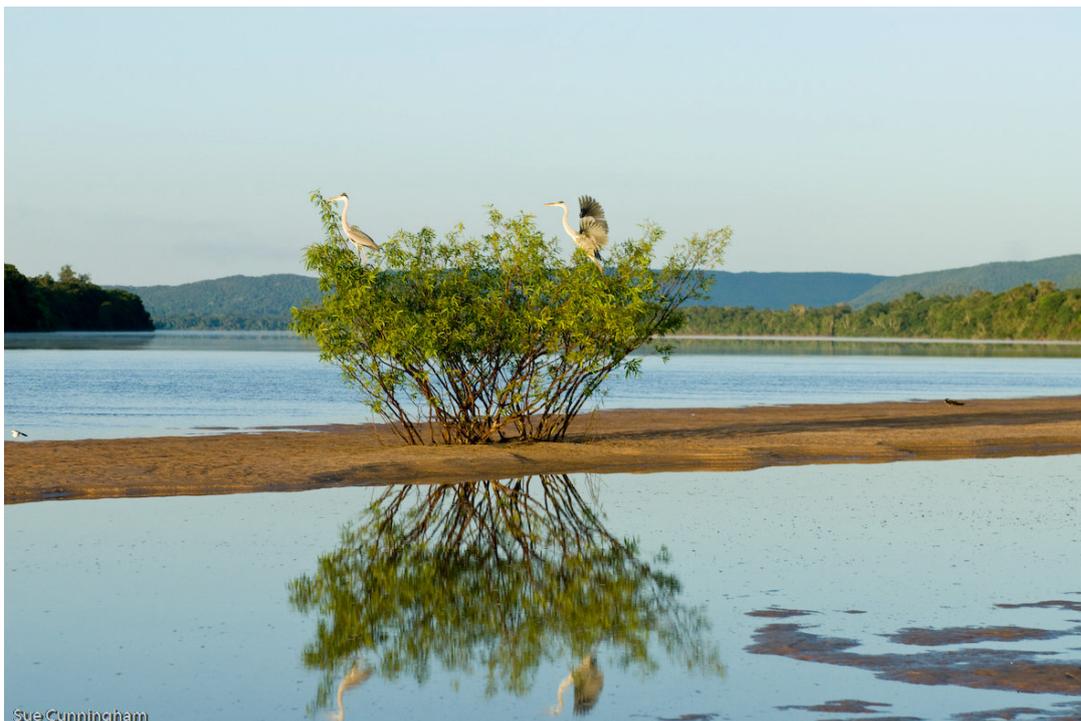
© Sue Cunningham  
Sting at the 1989 gathering



© Sue Cunningham  
Kuikuro warrior from the Xingu Indigenous Park



© Sue Cunningham  
Takakudjy Kayapo



© Sue Cunningham  
A remote stretch of the Xingu River

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## **Belo Monte: Background Information**

### **History**

The Brazilian government and electricity generating interests have long had their eyes on the Xingu. In 1989, they attempted to build a scheme similar to Belo Monte. In 1989, the dam was referred to as Kararaô, after a Kayapo village which would have been inundated. This time Eletrobrás the national electricity company in which the government holds 54% of the shares, has better PR.

The Kararaô scheme was prevented from going ahead after a coalition of indigenous groups, local and international organisations highlighted the enormity of its environmental and social costs, convincing the World Bank to withdraw funding. Sting and Anita Roddick attended a large protest meeting which was also held in Altamira.

But the government, pressurised by international mining and metallurgical companies, has been forging ahead. Several versions of the scheme have been proposed over the intervening years. The latest of these is being rushed through the processes of environmental assessment required under Brazilian law.

### **Technical**

Hydrological surveys show that, for a hydroelectric scheme on the Xingu to be viable, up to six additional dams will have to be built upstream from Belo Monte. These would regulate the flow, holding back huge volumes of water during the rainy season to enable the turbines to continue to turn during the dry months.

The government and Eletrobrás claim that their plan is for only a small hydroelectric plant at Belo Monte, fed by two channels from a reservoir formed behind a single dam. But campaigners believe that this will be just the start.

Belo Monte will flood over 440 square kilometres of agricultural land and rain forest. But if the next dam, Babaquara (or Altamira, as it has been re-named) is built, it will flood an unimaginable 6,000 square kilometres, including indigenous reserves, extensive areas of rain forest, agricultural land and cattle ranches, making it the second largest in the world.

If all six dams were to be built, a mind-boggling 20,000 square kilometres of the Amazon would disappear below the water.

### **Science**

Hydroelectricity was once held up as a 'green' energy source, which requires no fossil fuel and generates no greenhouse gases. But then scientists realised that many hydroelectric plants generate huge amounts of the greenhouse gases methane and nitrous oxide, which are more potent than carbon dioxide. Measurements taken from dams in Canada and French Guiana showed levels of gas emissions which shocked researchers. The worst culprits are shallow reservoirs in tropical areas – exactly the kind proposed for the Xingu.

Dams are responsible for greenhouse gas emissions throughout their lives. Production of the vast quantities of concrete and steel used in their construction is

highly energy intensive. During the filling of the dams and for a few years after, there is massive production of methane, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide as the drowned vegetation decomposes. Emissions continue through the life of the dam as organic matter enters the stagnant water and rots anaerobically. And finally, if the dam is decommissioned and drained, there will be another intense pulse as organic matter trapped in the sediment is exposed to oxygen, bacteria and other organisms, and decays.

Dams can contribute several times more to global warming than producing the same amount of electricity from fossil fuels. Dr Philip Fearnside, a scientist from the Manaus-based Institute for Amazon Research (INPA), explains the process; "When water samples are brought to the surface from the bottom of a reservoir in a sampling flask the water foams like Coca Cola when the flask is opened. Gases released in this way include both CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>, but, even though present in smaller quantities, it is the CH<sub>4</sub> that makes the impact of hydroelectric dams a concern for global warming." He goes on to explain that water emerging from the spillway of a dam experiences a sudden reduction in pressure, and behaves much like a bottle of Coca Cola when you suddenly unscrew the cap.

Methane is 21 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide; nitrous oxide is 310 times more powerful.

## **Economics**

On its own, the Belo Monte dam would produce little or no electricity for several months of the year. What electricity it does produce is likely to be sold at subsidised prices, below the cost of production, to international mining and metallurgical companies, leaving the Brazilian taxpayer and energy consumer to foot the bill.

Apart from these corporations, the only beneficiaries will be the construction and electricity companies. It is hard to understand why the Brazilian government is backing the scheme so heavily.

## **Legal**

Brazil has very progressive environmental and human rights legislation. It is also a signatory of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. To push ahead with the Belo Monte project, the Brazilian government is breaching its stated commitment to Indigenous rights, and riding roughshod over its own laws. Legal challenges have been quashed on highly spurious grounds, and the requirement for a thoroughgoing Environmental Assessment has been watered down to achieve the government's stated objective of licensing the project in 2009.

## **Social**

Apart from the disastrous effects on the indigenous tribal population, other people living locally will be affected. Thousands of families will be driven off their land, and will no longer be able to continue their way of life. Similar projects, notably the Tucuruí dam 250 kilometres to the south-west, have resulted in soaring malaria and dengue infection rates and steep falls in edible fish populations.

The poorest, inevitably, get the worst deal. Without legal title to the land they may have occupied for generations, they often receive no compensation, and are abandoned in the shanty towns which spring up around the towns which mushroom as a result to the development.

Dam projects attract tens of thousands of migrant workers into the area to work on the construction. Once the construction is complete, these too will be abandoned, with no alternative source of income. They will swell the growing shanty towns, or move into the rain forest to carve out small patches where they can grow food, bringing further destruction to the forest.

### **Further Information:**

<http://internationalrivers.org/en/latin-america/amazon-basin/xingu-river/tenot-m-executive-summary>  
Executive summary of a detailed report into Belo Monte, prepared by International Rivers:  
[www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org)

The full text of the book is available here (in six parts):

[capa](#) [parte I](#) [parte II](#) [parte III](#) [parte IV](#) [parte V](#)

Dr Philip Fearnside's article is here:

[http://philip.inpa.gov.br/publ\\_livres/Preprints/2004/HYDROELECTRIC%20DAMS-springboard%20commen-cc-ms.pdf](http://philip.inpa.gov.br/publ_livres/Preprints/2004/HYDROELECTRIC%20DAMS-springboard%20commen-cc-ms.pdf)

The UK Heart of Brazil Expedition navigated the entire length of the Xingu River in 2007.

<http://ipcst.wordpress.com>

New Scientist, February 2005, on Hydroelectricity and Global Warming:

<http://ff.org/centers/csspp/library/co2weekly/2005-03-10/hydroelectric.htm>

### **Supporting Organisations:**

**UK:** Survival International, [www.survival-international.org](http://www.survival-international.org). Rainforest Foundation [www.rainforestfoundationuk.org](http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org), Rainforest Concern [www.rainforestconcern.org](http://www.rainforestconcern.org), Indigenous People's Cultural Support Trust [www.ipcst.org](http://www.ipcst.org).

**International:** WWF [www.wwf.org.br](http://www.wwf.org.br), Environmental Defence Fund [www.edf.org](http://www.edf.org)  
International Rivers [www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org) (formerly International Rivers Network)

**Brazilian:** Fórum Popular de Altamira, Prelazia do Xingu, Fundação Viver Produzir e Preservar (FVPP), Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI), Sindicato dos Trabalhadores em Educação Pública do Pará - SINTEPP, Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras de Altamira Campo e Cidade - MMTA-CC, Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura – (FETAGRI), STTR-Altamira, Grupo de Trabalho Amazônico Regional Altamira (GTA), Forum da Amazônia Oriental, Comissão Pastoral da Terra, Associação do Moradores do Médio Xingu: these form the organising committee for the event. Other support groups include: Instituto Socioambiental – ISA [www.socioambiental.org](http://www.socioambiental.org), Floresta Protegida, Amigos da Terra (Friends of the Earth Brazil) [www.amigosdaterra.org.br/english/](http://www.amigosdaterra.org.br/english/), WWF [www.wwf.org.br](http://www.wwf.org.br) (in Portuguese).

### **UK Contact for more information:**

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If you are planning to attend the gathering and conference in Altamira, we can help with logistical advice. Facilities in Altamira are limited, but we will work with you to ensure that you have access to the best possible communications.

Pictures are available for reproduction at normal fee rates.