

God's Love for Life Sings in the Amazon Basin

[Submitted by Dr. Lesya Sabada]

Having been asked by Development and Peace, the official international development organization of the Catholic Church in Canada, to interview the Mura tribe situated southeast of Manaus and to take pictures of their village life, I spent three wonderful weeks in this Garden of Eden during the dry season. This was my third visit to the Amazon basin, so I knew that the rainforest extended through parts of Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. However, this time I was privileged to see the rainforest from the heartland of Brazil and the Pantanal, the world's largest wetland. The Amazon rainforest represents more than half of the planet's rainforests. It is one of the largest and most biodiverse tracts of forest in the world, an ecological marvel that took millions of years to evolve. The Amazon basin contains up to 10% of the world's species of plants, animals and insects, but in terms of products such as medicines, the value of the rainforest cannot be measured.

There are almost 6.5 million square kilometers of land in the Amazon basin and 100,000 kilometers of rivers and streams. It is home to more than 30 million people. Our guide taught us that the Amazon River sustains life through clean water, provides life-saving medicines and various forest products, and, by trapping carbon, helps to create the oxygen that we breathe. The whole planet depends on a healthy Amazon.

Our indigenous guide Roberto knew English, Portuguese, Spanish and several local dialects. He was married to a Mura tribeswoman and knew the jungle well. The indigenous people of Brazil number approximately 2.8 million, representing about .5% of the country's population. They live in approximately 400 scattered tribal communities, but legally control about 13% of Brazil's land. These groups are renowned for their defense of the Amazon, but they also are the marginalized poor in this part of the world.

The indigenous people are the stewards of the natural environment in Amazonia. With their inter-generational, traditional ecological knowledge, they have lived off the land while keeping ecosystems intact. As we navigated through the rainforest with Roberto, he talked to us about the traditional practices of indigenous peoples and their knowledge base, built up through centuries of careful observation and interaction with their surroundings. Clearly, if we are to understand and help manage the environment, we need to be humble enough to acknowledge the importance of the role of indigenous peoples.

Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to climate-related changes due to their close relationships with, and reliance on, fragile ecosystems. Environmental monitoring has been limited or nonexistent, so our awareness of the plight of indigenous people is equally limited. For this reason, Pope Francis convened an Integrated Ecology Synod of Bishops in Rome from October 6-27, 2019, as an extension of *Laudato Si'* (2015), to explore ideas for the Amazon region and the need to defend the poor and the environment they protect.

The Amazon basin has indeed become the locus for indigenous assertions of environmental rights in the face of intrusions by outside interests. Large vocal protests have become part of daily life at many of Brazil's public agencies, as indigenous people have insisted on the importance of the development of effective strategies for managing and conserving natural ecosystems. We need to include their perspectives and their traditional knowledge as we work towards improving environmental conservation and establishing fair management policies in Brazil, while also reinforcing the right of indigenous people to act as stewards of their traditional lands. They need to retain full access to those lands and to use them as is consistent with their ancient practices. At the same time, responsible and sustainable development initiatives need to address the need for clean water, education, and health care.

While we were in Manaus, my husband Thomas and I observed the growing pressure on the environment through deforestation. Forested areas are disappearing as human settlements expand and more land is "economically" mined, logged, or developed for cattle pastures and soybean farms, Brazil's primary export crop. The effects of legal and illegal deforestation included local disruptions to the water cycle, a recognizable change in precipitation patterns, and the resultant loss of biodiversity. Dams, logging, and road building in the Amazon were evident everywhere. We listened to local taxi drivers confess that they had driven loggers to illegally harvest trees within the forest. Their consciences were bothering them, yet they needed to support their own growing families. All of these changes adversely affected the livelihoods of the indigenous populations and undermined the effectiveness of the rainforest as a buffer to global climate change.

Since my return to Canada, I have reflected upon my privilege to visit this threatened Garden of Eden. I agree with conclusions and resolutions of the Amazon Synod. We as a human family must collectively understand that we commit "ecological sin," when we break the web of interdependence that the Creator established when the world was made. All are harmed by such sin. Furthermore, we must have compassion for the people who have been victimized by ecological sin, and especially for the indigenous people who suffer invaded, degraded lands and broken families. Together we can protect the Amazon by simplifying our lives. Together we can join God in singing our love for life.