What the death of a lone Indigenous man in Brazil can tell us about our global future

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The "Man of the hole," the Indigenous man who lived alone in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest for 26 years, died last month.

The man, whose nickname came from the holes he regularly dug in the ground, was the last living member of an uncontacted Indigenous tribe, the rest of whom were killed by ranchers, CNN reports. Brazil's Indigenous protection agency made unsuccessful attempts to contact him over the past two decades; they monitored the man from afar and discovered his death.

His death marks the tragic extinction of a people along with their language and culture. And as Brazil's presidential election approaches, experts say it's also a stark reminder of the urgent need to protect the Amazon rainforest, for the sake of Brazil's Indigenous groups and the planet as a whole.

The man of the hole represented one of the over 100 estimated uncontacted tribes in the Amazon rainforest, including one tribe that consists of three people. Deforestation, along with illness and murder, are ongoing threats to their survival; smaller tribes may even disappear without outside knowledge.

The death was likely due to natural causes, the New York Times reports. Still, the Indigenous rights group Survival International framed it as the end result of movements to decimate the rainforest, calling him "a symbol of Indigenous genocide."

"For this was indeed a genocide—the deliberate wiping out of an entire people by cattle ranchers hungry for land and wealth," said a Survival International spokesperson Fiona Watson in a statement.

His death is a tragedy for the individual and his tribe, but one expert says it's also a loss for our collective understanding of language and culture.

"First and foremost, it's just very tragic for this person," says Adam Cooper, associate teaching professor at Northeastern University's

College of Science. "As a linguist, it struck me that with his passing, all of the information about his culture, including his language … we'll never know about it now."

Understanding new, previously undiscovered languages gives us "a deeper appreciation … for what it means to be human," he says.

However, today most of the world's 7,000 languages are endangered, while a few languages, including English, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese, account for most of the world's speakers.

"Unfortunately, it has been something of a trend, where you have Indigenous communities with languages of their own that can be marginalized or even extinguished to the point that the group is gone, but also their language," Cooper says.

In the Brazilian Amazon, these communities depend on the rainforest to survive. But so does the rest of the globe.

"It's reaching a tipping point where if this doesn't change and if these politicians are elected, it will not only threaten Indigenous people who live there, but it's going to threaten our planet overall," says Nichola Minott, associate teaching professor at Northeastern's College of Social Sciences and Humanities.

The forest, which Minott calls "the lungs of our planet," is essential to maintaining a balanced ecosystem. It stores 90–140 billion tons of carbon and releases oxygen into the atmosphere; deforestation, meanwhile, releases the stored carbon.

Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro, however, has not prioritized the forest's protection. While land regulations meant that deforestation fell 83.5% between 2004 and 2012, after Bolsonaro took power in 2018 with 79%

of the vote, he fired environmental officials and reduced the enforcement of environmental policies, leaving the forest with little protection from threats like illegal mining.

Even before Bolsonaro was elected, "it was very difficult to protect those lands," says Claudia Tamsky, vice chair of ProGente Connections, a Framingham, Massachusetts, organization that supports Brazilian immigrants in the area. Born and raised in the Amazon rainforest, Tamsky has also participated in missionary work in the region, including the area where the "man of the hole" was found. She notes that the vastness of the region makes it difficult to protect.

"That's miles and miles of land and rivers and waterfalls and mountains," she says. "How are we going to protect that against miners?"

To protect the land and Indigenous peoples, FUNAI—the federal Indigenous protection agency—needs support from the army and the federal police, she says. But with less support from the federal government, she says, the Amazon is mostly protected by FUNAI agents; as a result, deforestation has risen 92% since he took office, and attacks on Indigenous people have risen as well.

The impact is already being felt in the rainforest. Draughts are more common than in previous years, as are higher temperatures. According to the World Wildlife Fund, 18% of the forest is already lost. It's a situation that Minott calls "bleak."

But with Brazil facing high inflation, Bolsonaro is loath to offer an alternative to exploiting the lucrative rainforest. And as demand stays high for products like soy from global markets, farmers push in further once soil is depleted, further encroaching on Indigenous land, Minott says.

Now, these issues are coming to a head as Brazil prepares for its next presidential election that begins on Oct. 2. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the former president of Brazil who says he'll stop deforestation, is leading Bolsonaro in the polls. He also said he would appoint an Indigenous cabinet member if elected.

On the congressional level, however, Minott sees few candidates who are willing to take on environmental issues and Indigenous rights. Minott notes that Joenia Wapichana is only one out of 118 Amazon members of Congress who ran on a pro-environment platform; her opponent in her reelection campaign is a gold prospector.

Instead, "many politicians are campaigning on the promise of bolder reductions on regulations, to increase access to gold mining and expand deforestation for agribusiness," she says.

"The few that do end up running on an environmental platform struggle to compete because right now there's a lot of public hostility against these initiatives," Minott says, calling environmental and Indigenous activism an "annoyance" for politicians.

Another part of the hesitancy to support these causes may come from threats of violence. "Being an environmental activist in Brazil in the current political environment is a death sentence," Minott says.

One rainforest activist was killed earlier this month, she notes, and in June, a British journalist and an activist were found killed in the Amazon. Both cases are presumed to be related to ongoing conflict in the Amazon.

"It's dangerous to be part of FUNAI (National Indian Foundation) in this government," Tamsky says. She says that violence is a real threat in this election. "We've never had so many threats against the FUNAI

employees," she says.

She'll vote in the election in October, casting her ballot from Boston. She thinks that Lula will win, but is afraid that Bolsonaro, the scandal-ridden politician who has been dubbed the "Trump of the Tropics," won't accept the results.

In the meantime, the Amazon rainforest is taking another hit in anticipation of Bolsonaro potentially losing power, with rampant deforestation and wildfires. "They know that as soon as Lula takes power, he's going to send the army and the federal police to arrest all those people," Tamsky says.

Moreover, a Lula presidency does not signal the end of the fight for Indigenous rights and environmental protections. Instead, Tamsky says, he will be one president in a line of leaders who take steps forward or backward on issues of environmental and Indigenous protection.

"Nothing has changed when we talk about Indigenous rights," Tamsky says. "What changes is the president in power will give a little bit more resources or less resources. They're always fighting for their rights."

"Their struggle is the same over and over," she says. "It's always the same."

Provided by Northeastern University

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