

# Expedition into the unknown uncovers remote Brazilian tribe threatened by hydroelectric dam

By Daniel Howden

Two British explorers have completed a gruelling six-month expedition down 2,500 kilometres (1,550

miles) of the Xingu river through the Cerrado savannahs and rainforest in the heart of Brazil.

Sue and Patrick Cunningham were the sole members of the expedition,

travelling in a small open boat accompanied only by a local boatman. The couple have received the Neville Shulman Award from the Royal Geographical Society for their ven-

ture. And their journey is being showcased in a London exhibition which opened this week.

The river passes through the largest Indian reserve in Brazil, and the couple visit

48 Indian villages. "The Indians of the Xingu are incredible people," said Sue Cunningham, "They have a profound knowledge of the forest; they use a huge number of plants and trees to provide for their everyday needs. And they are important for us, because the forest is a vital weapon in the fight against climate change."

The Cunninghams kept a blog of their journey.

## Departure, 6 April 2007

We finally departed Canarana on 3 April. Heading downriver, we arrived at the vigilance post where a Kalapalo family group watch over the entrance to the park. The local chief talks about his concern over the proposed Paranatinga II dam, of which we will hear more everywhere we go.

## Heart of Brazil, 23 May

Our boat, *Coração do Brasil*, is a 7m aluminium vessel. It is reinforced to withstand the rocks in the rapids and waterfalls. We have been accompanied by local boatmen from the start.

The first was Aparecido, a genial non-Indian from Canarana. He has worked for Funai, the government Indian agency, and has a wealth of knowledge of the people, plants and animals of the Cerrado.

The Indian way is to eat when food is available. The concept of three meals a day is alien, and a meal may occur at any time of day, though it usually happens in the afternoon or evening.

## Dams, 28 May

Most of the Xingu catchment area is now protected. But the headwaters, to the south, west and east, all lie outside of the protected areas. Much is converted to agriculture, and subject to deforestation. As the forest is cleared, the amount of sediment, agrottoxins and other pollution entering the river grows, affecting fish stocks and polluting drinking water. There are pro-

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On their journey down the Xingu, Sue and Patrick Cunningham passed through the largest Indian reserve in Brazil, and photographed many of its inhabitants



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### The heart of Brazil



posals to construct a series of six hydroelectric dams on all of the main tributaries of the Xingu. One, known as Paranatinga II, is already under construction. All of the people of the Xingu are

seriously concerned. Arivirá Matipu explains: "This hydroelectric scheme will destroy our supermarket. Our main source of food is the river, we don't eat game and we don't keep an-

imals to eat. Our food is fish, and the river provides it. If the dam is completed, the river will die. And if the river dies, we will have no food, there will be no more Indians and the forest will die."

#### Uncontacted tribes, 31 May

A few days ago, a previously unknown group of Kayapo emerged from the forest to contact their relatives in the village of Kremoro. The first contact was made by two men who approached the house of Bepro, son of one of the *benajures* [village chiefs]. He went to find out what was causing noises at the back of the house, to find two strange Indians, who beckoned for him to follow them into the forest. Bepro and his brother, Bepytire, decided to go to look for them. They soon found them and established that the strange Indians were Kayapo, though they spoke an archaic version of the language. The newcomers told them their people were worried because they knew the forest was being destroyed nearer and nearer to their village and, although they had built it under the

canopy of the forest, they were afraid they would be found and killed.

#### Metuktire, 7 June

Metuktire is the closest village to the site of an aeroplane accident last year involving a Gol Boeing and an executive jet which cost the lives of over a hundred people. The wreckage of the Boeing came to earth in a remote region of forest, and the people of Metuktire were the first on the scene. "We quickly realised there were no survivors," said Cacique Waiwai, one of the first to reach the wreckage. "All we could do was make a clearing so that the army could land their helicopters. Once they were there, they sent us away."

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#### Rapids, 15 June

We negotiated the two most difficult sets of rapids, the Von Martius and the Pedras. The previously placid river has given way to a series of rocky stretches, each of which is especially perilous at this time of year.

The night before, our camp was visited by a pair of tapirs, which arrived on the island from the bank of

the river, stayed briefly, then swam away again.

#### Frontier town, 4 July

São Félix do Xingu is a thriving town, deriving income from the ranches which have been torn out of the forest. But it has another side. There remain several large landowners who still use gunmen to frighten away, and occasionally kill, any of their workers who have stepped out of line.

#### Final destination, 27 July

As we sped towards Porto de Moz, our final destination, we thought about the strength of the indigenous cultures we had seen, and reflected on the progress many ethnic groups have made towards self-determination. We thought of the threats to the river and its people which are so powerful today, from the soya farms and hydroelectric schemes on the headwaters to the huge Belo Monte dam proposed so close to the mouth of the river.

An exhibition of photos from the journey runs at Gallery 32, Green St, London W1 until 18 October

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