

Home to plants and animals, of course, but how often do we think of forests as habitats for people? Yet millions around the world live in forests, with lifestyles interwoven with their environment. Indeed, it is thought that many forest communities in Latin America have yet to contact the wider world.

Most forest peoples are indigenous minorities living in small, tightly knit communities – and they have much to teach the rest of the world.

At the core is respect. The Bambuti people of the Congo refer to the forest as mother or father, and hold it sacred: a deity to ask for help and to thank. The Yanomami of Venezuela and Brazil believe that the natural and spiritual worlds are united: the fates of all people and the environment are inexorably linked. So when people destroy the environment, humanity slowly commits suicide.

Communities use the forest with restraint because it provides for their basic needs – food, shelter, water, medicine, fuel and clothing. In Borneo, the Penan harvest the sago palm, a fast-growing tree whose pithy trunk is loaded with starch used to make flour. Only the largest trunks are taken, the smaller shoots carefully preserved for future harvests. They call this *molong*, meaning never taking more than necessary.

When the Haida people of Canada fell a red cedar, the bark is made into a textile for clothing, ropes and sails, and the wood is used to make dugout canoes, ceremonial masks and boxes, and to build communal longhouses. Smaller branches are used for smoking salmon.

There is nothing new in this. Archaeological finds show that a Haida population was living on Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) off Canada's west coast 5,000 years ago. Egyptian records refer to people in the forests of the Congo 4,500 years ago. And scientists now suggest that at least 10 per cent of what is often regarded as virgin Amazonian rainforest was in fact carefully planted. The people there focused on establishing a diverse assortment of trees: fruits, nuts and palms.

Passing on information is the key to a successful forest lifestyle. Both the Bambuti and the Bagyeli of Cameroon make storytelling, music, dance and mime central to transmitting cultural knowledge. All provide opportunities to teach the next generation the ways of the ancestors, showing children how they did things – and how they are done now.

Many forest peoples were never completely isolated, and many who once were now interact with the outside world. Most Penan have moved into houses along rivers, but regularly return to the forest to hunt. Bambuti live in the forest but trade with villages, providing bushmeat and honey, acquiring manioc and other produce. The relationship between the Haida community and the Canadian Government is entrenched in the Haida Accord, which authorizes the Council of the Haida Nation to represent its people when dealing with the provincial and federal governments about land and resources.

But, in the end, it is their separateness – spiritual, if not physical – that is of the greatest value to the world.

Nothing new under the canopy

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