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Date: Fri, 31 May 2002 15:16:56 +0100
Subject: [evol-psych] Chagnon responds to Survival International's Derogatory Claims
Reply-To: "Ian Pitchford" <ian.pitchford@scientist.com>

CHAGNON RESPONDS TO SURVIVAL INTERNATIONAL'S DEROGATORY CLAIMS

I would like to register a strong protest against the insinuations in the May 29 Survival International News Release. It claims that one Dirk Wittenborn, author of a novel entitled "Fierce People", allegedly said on a BBC broadcast on 29 May that the Yanomamö Indians I have spent some 30 years studying were "the meanest people on the planet." SI implies that Wittenborn's statement was 'inspired' by my work. Stephen Corry of Survival International indicates that SI intends to complain to the Broadcasting Standards Commission about this allegedly racist statement.

On this logic, a claim that the Yanomamö Indians are "the most peaceful people on the planet" would appear to be equally racist.

Survival's news release also claims that Wittenborn's opinion "appears to be based on the work of the highly controversial anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon" whose work has been "heavily criticized and discredited by other anthropologists" as "thoroughly biased and even fabricated."

I want to register an even stronger protest against Survival International's deliberate and libelous misrepresentation of my work and my academic reputation. Who are these anthropologists who claim to have discredited my work and shown it to be biased and even fabricated? Corry should provide the names and credentials of these mysterious anthropologists and in what publications they have convincingly demonstrated this. Apart from politically inspired denunciations. My hunch is that many of the anthropologists who regard my work as "discredited" are either now or have in the past been associated with, receive support from, or are radical anthropologists sympathetic to the corporate and political objectives of Survival International. As a corporation, SI is in competition

for cash donations with several other similar NGOs like Cultural Survival, based in Boston, the Brazilian-based Pro-Yanomamö organization known as CCPy---the 'commission for the protection of the Yanomamö'---and several others. This latest news release by Survival International should be viewed in this context.

Survival International should be viewed as an 'industrial strength' international corporation attempting to gain an edge on it's competitors for donations to it's allegedly worthwhile causes. They, like all corporations, have to pay rent, pay staff, pay for advertising, pay for trips to distant places by their "campaigners" etc. Corry assures the reader that "A Survival campaigner who recently returned from visiting the Yanomami is available for interview." Is this "campaigner" one of the anthropologists Corry refers to earlier? Somebody who "campaigns" is engaged in a political or an economic activity. Anthropologists are supposed to collect empirical data by spending long periods of time with the tribesmen they study and report on.

SI and its competitors seemingly need and want the Yanomamö to be in their own "portfolios" because the Yanomamö are now one of the most famous remaining tribes on earth and a much-sought-after prize because their "plight" translates into more financial contributions made by sympathetic donors. The more downtrodden and exploited the Yanomamö can be made to be, the more likely donors will contribute out of a sense of guilt because THEIR OWN civilization and it's agents caused this lamentable and tragic situation. Something of a political race then ensues. Each corporate competitor must outdo the other in the pursuit of the prized Yanomamö---by expanding the list of Evil Doers or exaggerating their alleged crimes AND attempting to make tribesmen appear to have absolutely no human faults, blemishes, or defects. Any allusion to human defects---like being mean---is denounced as a racist statement. A blemish-free tribesman is easier to package and market, a more profitable commodity. This assumption appears to be based on racism. It seems to imply that people will not help the Yanomamö if they have ordinary human defects. Most normal people are quite willing to save people like the Yanomamö, blemishes and all.

Finally, I want to challenge Corry's insinuation that my research and publications on the Yanomamö have directly led to Brazilian governmental policies that do harm to the Yanomamö. This assertion has been so frequently repeated by my radical anthropological detractors and groups like SI that it approximates a Truth in their circles. I recently asked a prominent Brazilian journalist, who follows both my work and official Brazilian government policies as these relate to the Brazilian Yanomamö, to investigate this accusation. Here is his response:

Date: Thu, 08 Mar 2001 18:36:16 -0300
From: Euripedes Alcantara
Organization: VEJA
To: Napoleon Chagnon

I can assure you that I could not find a trace of Brazilian officials use of your work as a justification of a certain policy towards the Yanomamo. I have asked people on high ranks of the military, Funai and the Congress. They have searched on my request almost all documents related to the Brazilian indians policy. Nobody mentions your work as grounds for treating the indians one way or another.

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ORIGINAL PRESS RELEASE FROM SURVIVAL INTERNATIONAL

From: "Miriam Ross" <mr@survival-international.org>
Sent: Wednesday, May 29, 2002 5:38 PM
Subject: RACIST COMMENT ON BBC FUELS UNFOUNDED STEREOTYPE OF AMAZONIAN TRIBE

SURVIVAL INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASE

29 May 2002

RACIST COMMENT ON BBC FUELS UNFOUNDED STEREOTYPE OF AMAZONIAN TRIBE

The Yanomami tribe of the Amazon rainforest were branded 'the meanest people on the planet' in a racist insult broadcast on the BBC this morning. The remark, made by Dirk Wittenborn, author of the novel 'Fierce People', was completely without foundation. Similar comments in the past have been extremely harmful to the welfare of the Yanomami people. Survival intends to issue a complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Commission about this racist statement.

Wittenborn's opinion of the Yanomami appears to be based on the work of the highly controversial anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. Chagnon's work has been heavily criticised and discredited by other anthropologists who have worked with the Yanomami, and described as thoroughly biased and even fabricated.

The portrayal of the Yanomami as a 'fierce' and 'mean' people has been extremely damaging to their welfare in the last few decades. In the 1970s Sir Edmund Leach refused to back Yanomami land rights as he thought they would 'exterminate each other' and the British government rejected a funding proposal for an education programme in the 1990s stating that any project undertaken would need to 'reduce violence' amongst the Yanomami.

Up to 20% of the Yanomami were wiped out by disease and mercury poisoning as a result of invasion on their land during the 1990s,

they have been massacred by gold miners invading their land and denied full ownership of the lands they have lived on for thousands of years. More generally, the portrayal of tribes as 'primitive', 'Stone Age' and 'unchanged for centuries' is equally damaging to tribal peoples and is often used to 'justify' racist policies towards them.

Survival Director Stephen Corry stated, 'Staff at Survival International have known the Yanomami people for over 30 years and they are certainly not 'mean'. Frequently people do not attempt to check their 'facts' when talking about tribal peoples, enabling harmful misconceptions and stereotypes to prevail.'

A Survival campaigner who recently returned from visiting the Yanomami is available for interview. Extensive photos and footage available. For more information contact Miriam Ross on (+44) (0)20 7687 8700 or email mr@survival-international.org

If you would like to receive Survival's press releases by email please register your details on the following page of our website: <http://www.survival-international.org/enews.htm>

Survival International is a worldwide organisation supporting tribal peoples. It stands for their right to decide their own future and helps them protect their lives, lands and human rights.

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The Dawn of Human Culture
by Richard G. Klein, Blake Edgar
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