

Praise and Homage to the Uitoto Children of the Colombian Amazon

We, members of the Science Panel for the Amazon (SPA), join in the global rejoicing over the rescue alive of three Indigenous Uitoto girls Lesly Jacobombaire Mucutuy (13 years old), Soleiny Jacobombaire Mucutuy (9), and Cristin Ranoque Mucutuy (11 months), and one boy, Tien Ranoque Mucutuy (4), after going through a 40-day odyssey in the Colombian Amazon. This incredible saga included surviving a plane crash, overcoming the pain and sadness of witnessing the death of their mother at the crash site, and staying alive after a long and perilous pilgrimage through the tropical rainforest of the Colombian Amazon amidst 16-hour daily downpours. Their names and the multiple lessons of their ordeal will remain with us forever as a source of hope and resilience for humanity.

The whole odyssey was an accurate portrayal of the current delicate situation facing the Amazon as a region, and, in particular, the Indigenous societies of the Colombian Amazon. The four Indigenous children and their mother were traveling in the crashed plane to meet their father and husband in San José del Guaviare, after receiving death threats from guerrilla dissidents who did not bow to the 2016 peace agreement. The control of Amazonian territory continues to be a central objective of various armed groups in Colombia and other Amazonian countries fueled by illegal economies such as drug trafficking and mining inducing displacement and threatening self-determined wellbeing objectives of Indigenous peoples.

We homage the courage, resilience, and strength of the Uitoto children to survive for 40 days in a forest full of hazards from the very topography darkness, rotten branches, animals (jaguars, snakes, scorpions, and other arachnids, and insects including mosquito vectors of malaria, dengue, and leishmaniasis), and poisonous plants. The survival of the Uitoto children was not a miracle. It was made possible by their intelligence, persistence, resilience, and grit, particularly of the elder, Leslie, who guided their siblings through a journey that makes Dante's in the Divine Comedy pale in comparison. Equally important was the children's ancestral knowledge of the rainforest. They survived many days by eating known seeds, roots, and fruits, and owing to their survival skills and knowledge for living with and in the forest, as the Uitoto people and other Amazonian Indigenous peoples have done since time immemorial. The Amazonian Indigenous peoples maintain their own education before even going to school. This knowledge, which is not formal and is not carried out in a classroom, is key to being able to live in the forest.

It is possible to highlight 4 great moments and lessons from this shocking story: 1) The escape of the family from one of the innumerable conflicts that devastate the Amazon and are responsible for the death of so many Indigenous people. It is urgent that the rights and lives of Indigenous Peoples be respected so that families never again have to fight criminals and invaders to save their lives. 2) The miracle of the survival of Uitoto children in the face of a plane crash. 3) Survival in the jungle, which was not a miracle, but the result of the enormous knowledge of the Amazonian Indigenous Peoples about the forest, transmitted by their ancestors who have lived there for more than 12,000 years; their great capacity not only to understand the forest, but to face its challenges; and the importance of sharing knowledge between generations, which allowed a girl of just 13 years to not only survive but to help her younger brothers and sisters. 4) The

fundamental role played by Indigenous people from the Uitoto, Koreguaje, Sicuani, Nukak, and Murui communities, contributing their knowledge of the forest and their sensitivity towards different cultures, in the 35 days that the rescue operations lasted, an effort coordinated with 150 special military commandos of the Colombian Armed Forces. Both the knowledge of the forest by the Indigenous peoples, as well as the use of drones, helicopters, airplanes, and various scientific and technological tools were essential for the rescue of the children. The presence of Indigenous people in the search for the Uitoto children was fundamental to the success of the operations. It is important to remember that the children were fleeing a serious conflict situation in their homeland and therefore probably did not want to be found by people they did not trust. The presence of Indigenous people and the strategies used by them to find the children undoubtedly gave them more confidence to accept help.

The world seems quite surprised by the survival of these Indigenous children for 40 days in the forest. But Indigenous Peoples have lived in the forest for thousands of years. The lessons that the four Uitoto children have taught us, the rest of humanity, have and will have wide and long-lasting implications that will grow with time. These lessons are the importance of Indigenous ancestral knowledge that teaches us how to live and to survive with dignity, the importance of collective wellbeing, the trust and respect for mother nature; and the need for a slow, safe, and persistent march as an antidote against the frenetic and empty life that the current economic system has imposed on humanity. We firmly believe that the Uitoto children odyssey constitutes a very powerful social tipping point for humanity toward a much-needed change in our relationship with nature and to the SPA's pledge for development models capable of maintaining standing forests and flowing rivers in Amazonia, combining science with Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' knowledge. We need a new development model for the Amazon that respects the complex interaction between social systems and natural systems to live in it and let the Amazon live with us.

It is essential that society listens to what the Indigenous Peoples have been saying in numerous world forums: The Amazon is alive and takes care of its children and the elderly, just as the Indigenous guardians take care of the Amazon. Tropical forests are of the utmost importance not only for the peoples who inhabit them but for all humanity. It is necessary to recognize and guarantee the rights to the territories and to the life of the Indigenous peoples, who are primarily responsible for the conservation of the forest, the protection of carbon reserves, and biodiversity. The exceptional story of the survival of the Uitoto children demonstrates how society in general must continue to recognize the importance of the knowledge of Indigenous peoples.

Contributors

Germán Poveda, Department of Geosciences and Environment, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Medellín, Colombia and member of the Science Steering Committee of the Science Panel for the Amazon – SPA

Gregorio Mirabal, Climate Change and Biodiversity Coordinator of the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin - COICA and member of the Strategic Committee of the Science Panel for the Amazon – SPA

Marielos Peña Claros, Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and Co-Chair of the Science Panel for the Amazon – SPA

Carlos A. Nobre, Advanced Studies Institute at the Universidade de São Paulo, and Co-Chair of the Science Panel for the

Amazon – SPA

Gasodá Suruí, Author of the Science Panel for the Amazon and Coordinator of the Indigenous Cultural Center Paiter Wagoh Pakob

Simone Athayde, Author of the Science Panel for the Amazon and Associate Professor at the Latin American and Caribbean Center and Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies, Florida International University

Nadino Calapucha, Author of the Science Panel for the Amazon and Technical Responsible of COICA's Defense Program for Defenders

Emma Torres, VP of the Americas and Head of the New York Office of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and Strategic Coordinator of the Science Panel for the Amazon - SPA

André Fernando Baniwa, Author of the Science Panel for the Amazon and Director of the Territorial Demarcation Department at the Brazilian Ministry of Indigenous Peoples