

THE KAYAPO OF BRAZIL



The Kayapo people (**Figure I.2**) live in 44 villages on 5 reserves in the tropical rainforest of Brazil. The reserves are located in a protected area of the Amazon River Basin. The Kayapo have indigenous or independent rights over what happens in their territory. They maintain a traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and agriculture. The land has not been changed by large-scale farming, mining, or the expansion of towns and cities.

PROTECTING THEIR LAND

The Kayapo have a history of protecting their land and way of life. In the 1980s, the chiefs asked for the help of conservation groups and celebrities to secure legal recognition of their rights to the land. Demonstrations about protecting the Amazon were filmed and televised around the world. The Kayapo people succeeded at maintaining and protecting their traditional lifestyle and their land.



NEW CHALLENGES

But today, the Kayapo are facing new challenges. Their territory is drained by the Iriri and Xingu rivers, which are smaller rivers that flow into the Amazon River. The Brazilian government plans to build a large dam on the Xingu River. The construction of the Belo Monte Dam will require more than 100 000 workers. More than 20 000 people will be removed from their homes, roads will be built, and water will be diverted in some areas while other areas will be flooded, including in the Kayapo territory. No talks with local Indigenous peoples are planned. The Kayapo chiefs fear that the building of the dam will result in the loss of traditions, cultural values, and land. Environmentalists fear that the flooding of land will create vast amounts of greenhouse gases as well as threaten endangered species.

FIGHTING BACK

The Kayapo are well equipped to fight back. They know how to compete in the world economy, being the first Indigenous people to work with The Body Shop. They are knowledgeable about how to use the legal system. They have been able to get their story out around the world using social media, and they have gathered 600 000 signatures to present to the Brazilian government to stop the dam. However, they have not yet been successful in this campaign, and plans for building the dam continue.

FIGURE I.2 Kayapo men performing a ritual

EXPLORE THE ISSUE

1. Why do you think the Kayapo have been successful in the past in preventing development in their territory?
2. How do you think the lifestyle of the Kayapo might be changed if the dam is built?