

## Peruvian Honored for Defending Indigenous People

The Washington Post  
April 26, 2007

Growing up amid the Peruvian Amazon's raging rivers and rustling foliage, Julio Cusurichi Palacios learned at an early age how to balance nature's vast possibilities with his own limitations. He learned to leap from great heights and run long distances without getting hurt or lost. He dipped in fresh streams and trailed his father in the jungles.

This week, Cusurichi, 36, who came of age in the foothills of the Madre de Dios region at the southeastern tip of his native country, was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. He was celebrated Wednesday night in Washington for his persistence in fighting for the creation of a territorial reserve for indigenous people living in voluntary isolation and for the protection of the unspoiled rain forests of his childhood.

"The government thinks the Amazon is empty, but it is and has been inhabited for thousands of years," Cusurichi said in a telephone interview on the eve of his award ceremony at the [National Geographic Society](#). "This is not about political systems but about our responsibility towards human lives. It is not only affecting our culture, but the whole planet."

Politically excluded primitive communities nestled in the jungles bordering [Brazil](#) and [Bolivia](#) fought for centuries to defend the sovereignty of their territory and the purity of their habitat, choosing to live in isolation. Though he lives in the Amazon region in the small city of Puerto Maldonado, Cusurichi said it takes him four days by boat to get to a territorial reserve he helped create in 2002, an area of about 2,968 square miles, larger than Delaware.

He has brought international attention to the plight of those living there. He has taken on illegal logging enterprises and spoken out against oil drilling, raising his voice alongside environmental groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Cusurichi said unchecked illegal logging of the rare old-growth mahogany trees was an infringement on the indigenous people's way of life. Exposure to new diseases threatens to wipe out many of the secluded inhabitants. Their bows and arrows are no match for the firearms carried by loggers who appear without warning, he said.

Former president Alejandro Toledo, an indigenous Peruvian, created a ministry specializing in indigenous affairs. Now his successor, Alan Garc?a, has abolished that ministry and placed it under the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Garc?a, who met here with [President Bush](#) on Monday, is eager to push a stalled free-trade agreement through Congress.

"Alan Garc?a wants to keep us invisible and forgotten. He just remembers indigenous people during a campaign," Cusurichi said. He expressed alarm over Garc?a's rush to gain approval for [Peru's](#) trade agreement with the [United States](#) "without consideration of its effects."

"We need to resolve the problem of illegal logging in this free-trade agreement and its effects on human rights," Cusurichi said.

In 2006, Cusurichi, with a team of Peruvian and American lawyers from the NRDC, filed a lawsuit in [New York](#) against the U.S. departments of Homeland Security, Interior and Agriculture as well as three U.S. timber importers.

The lawsuit alleges that by importing big-leaf mahogany from Peru, the United States is violating the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The judge has not ruled on whether to accept jurisdiction, following a preliminary hearing in January.

There has been a dramatic increase in illegal mahogany logging in Madre de Dios, since a Brazilian ban made the choice wood even more scarce. After creation of the Madre de Dios reserve, Cusurichi kept track of the quantity of logs moving out of the area. When the government abandoned the monitoring posts he helped establish along the rivers, he trained local villagers to provide the same service and worked out a deal to have the government pay them.

A self-taught environmentalist, Cusurichi grew up without electricity in simple huts, sleeping on a bed of split palm tree trunks and mattresses woven with dried fronds. He used candlelight when he needed to study. On clear, starry nights, moonlight flooded dwelling places as the children sat with their elders to learn of the pharmaceutical use of the plants and leaves around them. They crouched around mounds of tacacho, a traditional dish of plantains and corn, and sipped masato, a drink made from manioc, which women chew and spit out so it ferments into a light alcoholic beverage.

His father taught him the ways of the wilderness and the rhythms of the wind and the Earth. When he was 7, Cusurichi tripped behind him to keep up as his father would suddenly change direction in anticipation of how certain animals would move.

"I have always been interested in defending my brothers and sisters," Cusurichi said. "Authorities would tell us we don't have rights, so I began studying without going to university. I started with the constitution, the different civil codes, the penal codes, laws that have to do with native communities and international conventions."

The "uncontacted," as they are known, avoid using rivers for transport in order to shield themselves from external boat traffic. They walk between the headwaters and they fish along the banks to stay safe. "They avoid the rivers, the highways of the jungle, to stay away from loggers," Cusurichi said.

During a confrontation in 2003, the villagers used bows and arrows to defend themselves against outsiders. One of the fishermen was paralyzed. In an incident in 2004, two loggers were killed in the same way. "Because they stay in the trees and we have no contact with them, we have no way of knowing how many of them were killed," Cusurichi said.