

Stone-Age Cannibals in West Papua

By Charles Montanaro

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I first spent time with the Korowai of Irian Jaya (West Papua) in 2004. They were discovered by Dutch missionaries in 1978 at Yaniruma, a village of some 200 where Kombai and Korowai now live together in relative harmony. There was a misunderstanding while we were trekking that led to some Kombai men firing arrows at the Korowai - luckily no-one was killed otherwise there would have been civil war.

The Korowai lived a stone-age existence and live in tree houses in the remote jungle with minimal contact from outsiders. There has never been a census but there are probably around 1,000 people living as they have for thousands of years. They remain cannibals but do not eat white men (or women).

My wife and I returned from Yaniruma a few days ago, co-incidentally at the same time as concerns had been raised about the welfare of Benedict Allen who was in Papua New Guinea. We have established a charity, Tribal Survival, which takes Western medicine provided by the WHO to help eradicate Lymphatic Filariasis (Elephantiasis) which is endemic there. We take two doctors along each year and go as well to check on progress.

Over the years, I have visited most of the tree houses and have come to know Fenilum, one of the best known chiefs who has organised several trips for us. Rather like the Inuit earlier this year (see [Letter from Greenland](#)), this seemed like a good opportunity to ask some-one about climate change who had never heard of the concept. Here is what Fenilum said.

“The climate has changed over the past 20 years. There are more extremes. The rivers are higher during the rainy season. Last year, two men (a Lani trader Atias Wonda and a Korowai Ola Alera) were paddling their canoe from Manggel to Yafufla. They stopped at a shelter on a beach surrounded by a lake as they normally did during the dry season. That evening, there was a big storm up river and after an hour the waters rose by more than six feet. This had never happened before. They moved their bags to the roof. They were very scared as the water continued to rise and they expected to drown - Atias could

not swim. Fortunately, a boat was sent from Manggel which rescued them just in time. They were both badly shaken by the experience.

Nowadays, there is rain when we expect sun and sun when there is normally rain. "The weather is all mixed up" (in Korowai: dimone letel ul laniam hakko bamolo; in Indonesian: cuaca menjadi antara keduanya)."

When asked his view of the cause of the changes, he felt that establishing a village at Yaniruma may be the reason. This had led to the introduction of Western food, changes in diet and to new diseases. He wondered if contact with the West was the cause of climate change.

We might suggest other causes.

While we were in the jungle we also took this video of a [Tribal Dance](#) which you may enjoy watching!