

 ADAPTED VERSION

The British explorer lost in the wilderness

Should we leave remote tribes alone? A search is on for a British explorer who has not returned home from an expedition in Papua New Guinea. Some believe he should never have gone at all.



Hazardous: Downpours, landslides and warring tribes meet explorers in PNG. © David Osborne

Humans have plumbed the depths of the oceans and scaled the highest mountains. **No island remains undiscovered.**

But there are still pockets of wilderness in the world — and yes, explorers do still exist.

The vast, jungly interior of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of these remaining areas, and **Benedict Allen**, a 57-year-old from south-west London is one of the world's great modern explorers.

And he is missing. His sister Katie says she was expecting to hear from him by Monday — and he has not taken his planned flights home. It is “out of character”, she says. “It’s ghastly.” Now a frantic search is on to find Allen, who travels without a satellite phone or GPS, “because this is how I do my journeys of exploration”.

He was attempting to find the reclusive Yafo tribe, whom he first met 30 years ago. There are over 300 tribes in PNG, many of whom have had little contact with the outside world. A small handful have had absolutely none. Some of these tribes are infamous for

cannibalism.

These uncontacted tribes have been called “the last free people on Earth”. There are **roughly 100**, and they are found in equatorial rainforests, especially in South America and **New Guinea**.

We can assume that they have no idea of the existence of cars, televisions or modern medicine. Surely, then, it is our duty to introduce them to our world?

But this is a difficult moral issue. The charity Survival International aims to protect tribes from outsiders who subject them to “genocidal violence, slavery and racism so they can steal their lands, resources and labour in the name of ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation.’”

Outsiders can also spread diseases to people with no immunisation, potentially wiping out entire peoples.

The Indian government has made it illegal to contact the people of **North Sentinel Island** in the Indian Ocean. No boat may go within three miles of the island, whose inhabitants have been known to throw rocks and fire

poisoned arrows at any outsiders. The government of PNG has no such laws.

First contact

“Leave them alone”, say many activists. They are the most vulnerable peoples on the planet. If we care about human rights at all, we should surely care about the most endangered. Their languages, knowledge of their environment and view of life are unique. They know things we do not, and they add enormously to the diversity of human life.

“Let’s not romanticise these tribes”, reply others. The lives of uncontacted people are short, narrow and dangerous. The rest of the world has produced so many wonderful things, and it is selfish to refuse to share them with others. These people are not zoo animals; they are human beings who deserve the same chances as everyone else.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: Benedict Allen, a 57-year-old British explorer, has gone missing after spending three weeks in the remote jungles of Papua New Guinea. He was attempting to contact a

tribe that has had very limited contact with the outside world due to the impenetrable PNG terrain. We know that, despite the vast reach of globalisation, there remain a handful of “uncontacted tribes” in the world.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Whether these tribes will remain

uncontacted. Their forest homes are frequently under threat from logging, mining and other human activity, and the number of uncontacted tribes has dwindled rapidly in the last hundred years. We also do not know to what extent tribal culture would survive more contact with the outside world.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is it ethical to contact tribes that have no knowledge of the wider world?
2. Are these societies better or worse than ours? Or simply different?

ACTIVITIES

1. List five objects you would show to a member of an uncontacted tribe to tell them about the outside world.
2. Pick a tribe and research its way of life. In a presentation to the class, name three ways in which your society could learn from the tribe, and three ways in which they could learn from us.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"Ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."
Thomas Gray

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

No island remains undiscovered – The last continent to be discovered was Antarctica in the early 1800s. The last unknown major land mass was Severnaya Zemlya, an archipelago of polar desert off the coast of Siberia, discovered in 1913 and not fully explored until 1930.

Benedict Allen – Allen's first solo adventure

was at age 22, when he ventured into the Amazon and was shot at by two hitmen. His tough moments have included eating his own dog to survive. "For me personally, exploration isn't about conquering nature, planting flags or leaving your mark. It's about the opposite: opening yourself up and allowing the place to leave its mark on you", he says.

Roughly 100 – Of course no one knows for sure. At least 70 are known, with Rebecca

Spooner of Survival International estimating that there are around 100.

New Guinea – The world's second largest island is divided roughly equally between the independent country of Papua New Guinea and the Indonesian province of Papua.

North Sentinel Island – In 2006, two illegal fisherman were killed by the Sentinelese after drawing too close to their shores.

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 Notes

