



Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Indigenous Peoples and local communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and the Planet. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impact, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap. This is precisely the reason why this case study has been crafted through a collaborative process with the representatives of the winning initiatives. The goal is to thoroughly integrate their voices and experiences, showcasing their efforts in driving local action within their respective environments.

The **UNDP Equator Initiative**, supported by generous funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), awarded the Equator Prize in 2024 to 11 outstanding Indigenous Peoples and local community-led initiatives from eight countries. The winning organizations showcase innovative, nature-based solutions for tackling biodiversity loss and climate change. Selected

from a pool of over 600 nominations from 102 countries, this year's winners align with the Equator Prize 2024 theme 'Nature for Climate Action,' showcasing groundbreaking solutions across three categories: Nature for Climate Mitigation, Nature for Climate Adaptation and Resilience, and Nature for a Just Transition. All 11 winners were celebrated at a high-profile event, held virtually, on October 3rd, in the lead up to the biodiversity and climate change negotiations at CBD COP16 and UNFCCC COP29. The event was part of the **Nature for Life Hub**, a four-day series of virtual events designed to raise ambition for nature-based solutions in global biodiversity and climate policy. The Equator Prize 2024 winners are restoring ecosystems, advancing regenerative practices, and fostering a green, circular economy, with innovative solutions that mitigate emissions, build climate resilience, and drive a just, inclusive transition to a zero-carbon future.

The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to scale nature-based solutions essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



PROJECT SUMMARY

The União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley or UNIVAJA by its Portuguese acronym) is an alliance of 16 distinct Indigenous Peoples groups living in one of the most socio-biodiverse regions of the Western Amazon. Covering over 8.5 million hectares in the state of Amazonas, in the far west of Brazil, on the border of Peru, the Javari Valley is home to the world's largest concentration of voluntarily isolated Indigenous Peoples, alongside numerous other ethnic groups who have maintained their languages, knowledge systems, and governance institutions.

Faced with intensifying illegal invasions by miners, loggers, drug traffickers, and poachers, UNIVAJA was formed in 2010 to defend the cultural and territorial integrity of the Javari Valley through Indigenous-led surveillance, political advocacy, and international alliances. In 2020, they launched the *Equipe de Vigilância Territorial Indígena* (Indigenous Territory Protection Team or EVU by its Portuguese acronym). The innovative initiative combines Traditional Knowledge with technologies, such as GPS, drones, remote sensing, and strategic partnerships.

UNIVAJA advocates for environmental protection, territorial demarcation, and respect for Indigenous Peoples' autonomy at all levels. Through the alliance of UNIVAJA, in the face of constant threats, the communities of the Javari Valley stand united to protect the Land, honour their Ancestors, and defend future generations.



The depiction and use of boundaries and related information shown on maps or included in the text of this document are not guaranteed to be free from error, nor do they imply official acceptance or recognition by the United Nations.

KEY FACTS

Equator Prize winner

2024

Founded

2010

Location

Atalaia do Norte, Vale do Javari Indigenous Territory, Amazonas state, Federative Republic of Brazil

Beneficiaries

6,183 direct beneficiaries from several different ethnic groups; 14,000 to 20,000 indirect beneficiaries across the Javari Valley

Thematic areas

Land rights and tenure security; Governance and capacity building; Preservation of Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge

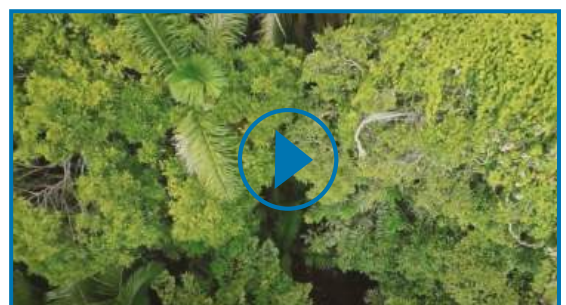
Fields of work

Eco-monitoring or patrols; Policy, regulatory, or legal advocacy; Women's groups

Sustainable Development Goals addressed



EQUATOR PRIZE 2024 WINNER FILM





BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Before the demarcation of the lands, there was no control over access to the Terra Indígena Vale do Javari (TIVJ) nor over logging, hunting, fishing, gold mining, and the use of other natural resources. Even Petrobras, a Brazilian state-owned company, conducted oil exploration activities in areas inhabited by isolated Indigenous Peoples in the 1970s and 80s, threatening their survival. On November 12, 1998, declaratory Ordinance No. 818 was published by the Ministry of Justice, establishing the limits for its demarcation. Demarcation works were then carried out, limiting access by unauthorized persons. Since then, the TIVJ has been recognized as a demarcated land, with limits defined by the Federal Government.

Although the state's presence is more evident, tensions still exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, or interethnic groups. Despite being officially demarcated and approved, the TIVJ is frequently invaded by loggers, fishermen, miners, and other groups interested in exploiting its natural resources, as it is a preserved area with rich fauna and flora, fishing rivers, and several species of hardwood. In addition, the Javari Valley is a border area, which generates binational interethnic relations and conflicts.

Historically, the presence of Indigenous Peoples in their Territories has meant that they have acted as effective barriers to the advancement of deforestation and other plundering processes. However, since 2019, data has shown that Indigenous Peoples and their Traditional Territories are increasingly under threat. In fact, violence against Indigenous Peoples has been fueled by governments' misguided development plans that encourage and validate the provision of Indigenous Lands and the common goods contained therein to agribusiness, mining, and logging entrepreneurs, among others.

The Indigenous movement in Javari Valley began with the creation of CIVAJA – the Javari Valley Indigenous Council in 1991, which was later dissolved, giving way to UNIVAJA – the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley, created in 2007. Over the years, the associations supporting each Indigenous Peoples group and village location have emerged. New transformations are underway, originating from emerging leaders and the diversification of political spaces for action. However, there is a recognition that territorial conservation achievements have resulted from local collective actions and mobilization. This understanding has guided the development of the project currently being implemented, based on two pillars: surveillance and protection of the Territory and strengthening of the Indigenous movement.

— Eriverto da Silva Vargas, Project Coordinator and Representative, UNIVAJA

The *Terra Indígena Vale do Javari* (Javari Valley Indigenous Territory or TIVJ by its Portuguese acronym) is one of the largest and most important areas of environmental and cultural diversity and richness in the world. Covering over 8.5 million hectares in Brazil's western Amazon, along the border of Brazil and Peru, the TIVJ is composed of dense tropical forests and river systems. It is home to an estimated population of around 6,500 people and at least seven distinct ethnic groups: Marubo, Matis, Mayoruna/Matsés, Kanamari, Kulina Pano, Tsohom-Dyapa, and Korubo (the latter two recently contacted). There are also official records, confirmed by the National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (FUNAI), of at least 16 places demonstrating the presence of Peoples in voluntary isolation. It is, therefore, the region of the planet with the highest concentration of uncontacted Peoples in the world.

The Territory was officially recognized by the Brazilian government in 1998 and demarcated in the early 2000s. However, enforcement has been ineffective, particularly in recent years. The region is increasingly under siege by illegal gold miners, loggers, poachers, and drug traffickers

Origin and structure

Although the Brazilian government formally demarcated TIVJ in 2001, enforcement was inconsistent, and the Indigenous Peoples inhabiting the Territory remained vulnerable to illegal invasions, disease outbreaks, and political exclusion. In response to these threats, in 2010, Elders, leaders, and community organizers from the Indigenous Territory came together to create a unified body capable of defending their collective interests. The União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley or UNIVAJA by its Portuguese acronym) was a direct response to growing threats against the land, rights, and lives of Indigenous Peoples in the Javari Valley. The organization coordinates the collective defence of the TIVJ, promotes political unity among different ethnic groups, and ensures that Indigenous Peoples, especially isolated communities, have the autonomy to manage their Lands according to their own values. UNIVAJA's traditional surveillance techniques (such as animal tracking and river patrols), as well as GPS mapping, drone monitoring, and legal action, are used to protect the Territory. UNIVAJA also defends linguistic and

who enter the forest by river or small aircraft, often with support from powerful criminal networks. Their presence threatens not only ecosystems, but also the survival of isolated and recently contacted groups whose immune systems remain highly vulnerable to disease. The invasions have also brought violence. Community leaders and forest guardians have faced threats, harassment, and, in some cases, murder. The 2022 murders of Indigenous rights activist Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips while working in the Javari Valley drew international attention, but these were not isolated incidents. For many in the region, resistance has been a daily act of survival.

The Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley maintain traditional livelihoods, relying on the collection of forest resources, rotational agriculture, hunting, and fishing. Communities preserve and use their native languages and traditions, passing them down from generation to generation. Their social organization and way of life, built on their knowledge of the Territory, is at the forefront of managing and protecting the region's immense, longstanding forests and rivers.

cultural heritage by organizing assemblies, storytelling events, and intergenerational transmission rituals.

The organization's headquarters are located in Atalaia do Norte, Amazonas, the closest urban centre to the TIVJ. Its structure is organized around a General Assembly composed of delegates from all participating communities. The assembly elects a rotating Coordination Committee, including a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The *Equipe de Vigilância Territorial Indígena* (Indigenous Territorial Protection Team or EVU by its Portuguese acronym) was formed in 2020 to implement frontline monitoring, advocacy, and community defence. UNIVAJA also maintains legal, communications, and health commissions. This collective model ensures that decisions reflect the diverse perspectives of the Javari Valley's communities while advancing their shared mission to protect the Land, lives, and future of Indigenous Peoples in TIVJ, and above all contribute to the well-being of the entire planet.



“We play a fundamental role in defending and promoting the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Amazon region. The organization is essential in the fight against the invasion of Indigenous Lands, addressing challenges such as illegal deforestation, the exploitation of natural resources, and the presence of miners and loggers. Collaborative work with government authorities and other NGOs guides our actions, contributing to the conservation of the Amazon rainforest and the mitigation of climate change.”

— Eliésio da Silva Vargas, Legal Attorney, UNIVAJA

Growing threats from illegal extraction and organized crime

The ecological richness of the *Terra Indígena Vale do Javari* (Javari Valley Indigenous Territory or TIVJ by its Portuguese acronym), which remained relatively protected for many years, has ironically made it a target for external exploitation. Extraction industries such as fishing, gold mining, and logging destroy the forest, pollute rivers with mercury, and decimate wildlife populations. This ongoing invasion not only undermines sovereignty but also forces Indigenous communities to live in a constant state of defensive mobilization, diverting energy from cultural preservation, health, and education. Community members who speak out often face retaliation, and law enforcement responses are inconsistent or nonexistent.

Illegal fishing operations have been a major threat, depleting vital fish and turtle stocks in nearly all of the Javari rivers and bringing associated criminal activity. These invading fishers target wildlife such as the yellow-spotted river turtle (*Podocnemis unifilis*) and the Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*), one of the world's largest freshwater fish. These operations undermine the food security of Indigenous communities and uncontacted groups who

depend on the same resources. In 2022, Indigenous activist Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips were murdered by illegal fishermen while traveling to meet Indigenous activists at a riverside surveillance point that was created to monitor illegal fishing gangs in the TIVJ. This act of violence highlights the extreme dangers of monitoring and reporting illicit extraction activities in the TIVJ.

Gold mining, concentrated in the eastern sector of TIVJ, overlaps with areas that have a high presence of uncontacted Peoples and poses a serious risk of environmental contamination and violent conflict. Although large-scale logging by foreign actors entering the Javari River from Peru declined after the 1990s, small-scale incursions persist and continue to affect Indigenous communities. Many of these extractive activities are linked to organized crime and drug trafficking. These groups use violence and intimidation to maintain control and their entanglement with criminal networks makes intervention especially dangerous, undermining Indigenous rights, environmental governance, and the safety of those defending the forest.

Cultural change and migration

Indigenous youth in the Javari Valley face growing social and cultural pressures as more and more of them leave their villages for urban centres in search of education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. While this migration is often driven by necessity, it exposes young people to environments that can be profoundly alienating and harmful. In the city, as well as through media and commercial operations, they can encounter drug trafficking networks, aggressive proselytism by evangelical missionaries, and lifestyles that often conflict with their cultural values and worldview. Young people are often caught between tradition and external pressures. Languages may be lost, rituals interrupted, and stories may go untold as the transmission of knowledge between generations weakens.

The absence of young people in the villages has broader consequences for the preservation of Indigenous ways of life and territorial protection. Without the younger generation to participate in agriculture, hunting, and cultural transmission, communities struggle to maintain their self-sufficiency and Traditional Ecological Knowledge systems. This demographic shift can leave Indigenous Territories more vulnerable to external threats and depopulated villages can be used as political justification to challenge the legitimacy of demarcated Indigenous Lands, further endangering the survival of both the people and the ecosystems they have stewarded for generations.

Unstable national political support

Political support for Indigenous Peoples in the TIVJ has been unreliable throughout Brazil's recent history. The National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (*Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* or FUNAI by its Portuguese acronym), tasked with protecting these communities, has been chronically underfunded and politically undermined, particularly during specific federal administrations that opposed Indigenous rights. Although efforts are now underway to rebuild the institution under a more sympathetic administration, its current staff is just 20 percent of its former size, and it lacks the capacity, training programmes, and armed protection needed to effectively operate in the remote and dangerous TIVJ border region. Coordination with the military, police, and environmental enforcement agencies like the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (*Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis* or IBAMA by its Portuguese acronym) remains sporadic, further eroding the ability to respond to illegal incursions and protect vulnerable communities.

Other obstacles exist as well. The Brazilian National Congress remains dominated by powerful agribusiness, mining, and evangelical blocs that have pushed forward laws and constitutional amendments threatening Indigenous sovereignty and rights. One major concern is the *Marco Temporal*, meaning Time Limit or Time Frame. The *Marco Temporal* framework seeks to limit land claims to Territories occupied by Indigenous Peoples as of the 1988 Constitution (the year Brazil's current Constitution was ratified). Indigenous groups counter that they have a right to reclaim the many Lands forcibly taken before 1988. Although the Supreme Court ruled against *Marco Temporal*, Congress passed a bill enshrining it into law, and a constitutional amendment is currently under debate to make it permanent. Such legal and political maneuvers not only hinder land demarcation but also embolden local actors to challenge the size and legitimacy of Indigenous Territories like TIVJ.

Vulnerabilities of uncontacted Indigenous Peoples

The Javari Valley is home to the world's highest concentration of voluntarily uncontacted Indigenous Peoples. The geographic and environmental characteristics of the Amazon, and the Javari Valley in particular, have allowed for Indigenous Peoples to remain uncontacted. Brazilian law recognizes their rights to isolation and protection by inviolable territorial boundaries. However, satellite images and tracking data confirm that no contact zones have

been breached multiple times in recent years, sometimes by missionaries, and other times by traffickers and illegal extraction groups. When protections are not enforced, uncontacted groups are exposed to deadly risks, including ecological and cultural destruction, viral exposure, and epidemics like influenza and COVID-19. Isolated community members do not develop all the immunological memories for diseases present in other societies. This

reality means that a simple flu can be deadly. Adding to the threat, communities lack adequate healthcare. Clinics are few, often under-resourced, and culturally insensitive. Residents face frequent outbreaks of malaria, hepatitis, and parasitic infections without access to clean water, medical personnel, or culturally appropriate care. During the COVID-19 pandemic health workers were slow to arrive, vaccination efforts lagged, and community members died without treatment. These issues are further complicated by a lack of emergency transport and communication infrastructure. River journeys to medical centres can take days, and in some areas, radio contact is the only way

to summon help, if batteries are charged and signals are strong.

In addition, uncontacted Indigenous Peoples depend entirely on the provision of natural resources from their Lands. Therefore, any action that negatively impacts the environmental conditions of their Territories puts them at risk. For example, river pollution, illegal wildlife extraction, increased fires due to climate change, and the cutting of forests for agriculture are a direct threat to uncontacted Indigenous Peoples.

Challenges in demarcating the Territory

The demarcation of the TIVJ involved immense challenges and continuous setbacks over the course of more than 20 years. Initial proposals in 1969 called for the creation of a National Park between the Ituí and Itaquai rivers. These proposals recognized only two Indigenous Peoples groups and excluded others. Although a 1972 revised proposal sought to include all Indigenous Peoples, the initiative stalled and was only revived in 1980 by FUNAI. An ethnographic and land survey of the area done in 1985 supported a unified Territory for all Indigenous Peoples; however, conflicts escalated, and invasive practices intensified, with increased invasions by loggers, rubber tappers, and illegal fishers. Hostility from nearby urban populations also intensified, culminating in the 1990 killing of three uncontacted Korubo Indigenous Peoples. The act pressured FUNAI to resume demarcation in 1992.

Persistent resistance, ineffective enforcement, and growing criminal activity continued to undermine the process. However, in 1995, under the leadership of anthropologist Walter Coutinho and the resilience of the region's Indigenous Peoples, the Territory was finally identified and demarcated. The Ministry of Justice officially designated the Territory as the *Terra Indígena Vale do Javari* in 1998, and it was ratified in 2001 by the Brazilian President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Ratification did not bring an end to invasions and conflict between the Indigenous Peoples and other inhabitants of the region. The area remains fraught with socio-environmental vulnerability, a growing level of organized crime and drug trafficking, and ongoing threats to Indigenous Peoples' lives and Lands. Maintaining clearly marked borders and enforcing regulations remains a perilous and challenging task. The vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples within the Territory, even after demarcation, shows that legal land demarcation alone is insufficient to guarantee protection and peace.



LOCAL RESPONSES

“UNIVAJA’s main focus is the defence and autonomy of the Indigenous Peoples of the Vale do Javari Indigenous Land through environmental and territorial management based on constitutional legal frameworks and our original rights. Yet, our work is not limited to the physical protection of the Territory. It incorporates the principle of Indigenous protagonism in all phases, from the conception to the execution of projects, aiming not only at the conservation of natural resources, but also at the preservation of traditional cultures and ways of life. In the songs and dances we echo through the forest and in the activities, we carry out in the city, we celebrate our rites, which are present in our daily lives.”

— Varney Thoda Tavares, Vice Coordinator, UNIVAJA

Establishing Indigenous-led surveillance and territorial protection

Faced with increased invasions and a lack of support, in 2021, the União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley or UNIVAJA by its Portuguese acronym) launched the *Equipe de Vigilância Territorial Indígena* (Indigenous Territory Protection Team or EVU by its Portuguese acronym). The team was formed to monitor and report on illegal mining, poaching, logging, and drug trafficking, as well as to establish maps of the main rivers where fishermen and poachers operate. The Indigenous-led initiative is based on Ancestral tracking knowledge and enhanced by modern tools, including GPS, drones, and satellite imagery, to monitor the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory (or TIVJ by its Portuguese acronym), which protects 217,500 hectares. Unlike conventional enforcement agencies, the surveillance team is deeply embedded in the communities it serves. Members are selected by Elders and community assemblies and trained in both traditional land-use

knowledge and technical monitoring skills. They know the forest intimately, noticing the movement of rivers, the rhythms of the animals, and disturbances outsiders rarely see. This awareness gives them a powerful advantage in detecting and preventing invasions.

Patrols are launched by canoe, foot, or drone-assisted reconnaissance, depending on the terrain and threat level. The team documents illegal encampments, gold mining operations, and poaching routes. Data is geo-referenced and compiled into reports that are submitted to the National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (*Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* or FUNAI by its Portuguese acronym), the Federal Police, and the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (*Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis* or IBAMA by its Portuguese acronym)—agencies that benefit from EVU’s intelligence and field knowledge. The EVU documents its data with UNIVAJA’s legal

counsel for use with the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office and judicial bodies. The UNIVAJA team is also collaborating with technology partners to develop more secure and encrypted systems that protect sensitive location data, especially in cases involving isolated groups. They are exploring blockchain applications to ensure data integrity and track evidence.

The team carried out its first test mission in August 2021, following its successful experience in responding to the unexpected challenges of the pandemic. Since then, UNIVAJA has trained 67 Indigenous ethno-environmental monitors in safety practices, the use of surveillance technologies, equipment maintenance, data input and documentation, and cataloguing evidence of sufficient quality for formal legal proceedings, among other skills. Its teams conducted 13 monitoring missions between

January 2022 and February 2024, in addition to several joint operations with the Federal Police, IBAMA, and FUNAI. It established permanent monitoring of 803 kilometres of rivers as well as periodic monitoring of 2,175 kilometres of rivers.

The team's work has led to the exposure of multiple illegal mining operations and the dismantling of poaching camps. In fact, illegal fishing and hunting are no longer practised openly as they once were. Unfortunately, illegal trade continues, and federal and state support remains inconsistent. As a result, the surveillance team began using the evidence they collected to motivate authorities, mobilize international allies, and document invasions and the government's lack of response to them. The EVU has become a reference in Brazil and a source of pride for all the people of the TIVJ.

KEY IMPACTS

Establishing Indigenous-led surveillance and territorial protection



- UNIVAJA launched and maintained the first Indigenous-led surveillance team in TIVJ, protecting 217,500 hectares.
- The EVU established permanent monitoring and surveillance of 803 kilometres of rivers, as well as periodic monitoring of 2,175 kilometres of rivers.
- UNIVAJA trained 67 Indigenous ethno-environmental monitors/guards from 2022 to 2024.
- The EVU conducted 13 monitoring missions between January 2022 and February 2024.

Generating economic alternatives through *pirarucu* management in the TIVJ

UNIVAJA is promoting sustainable economic alternatives for the Indigenous Peoples of the TIVJ through community-based management of *pirarucu* (*Arapaima gigas*). The fish is one of the largest and most valuable fish species in the Amazon. In the TIVJ, it is a key source of protein for local communities and the main target of illegal commercial fishers. Although often overfished in surrounding areas, *pirarucu* remains abundant within Indigenous Lands, making it an important resource.

In 2022, UNIVAJA launched an initiative with the Kanamari Indigenous Peoples of the Middle Javari River to support Indigenous-led sustainable management and fishing of *pirarucu*. With support from IBAMA, the Indigenous Labour Council (CTI) and others, the Pirarucu Management Initiative encourages conservation and territorial defence, ensuring food security and generating economic value. Surplus fish can be sold legally outside the Indigenous Territory, offering an alternative to illegal extraction and trade.

Beyond the economic benefits, the initiative has strengthened Indigenous surveillance and control over vulnerable lake regions, especially along the border with Peru. Systematic monitoring by local communities not only protects *pirarucu* populations from illegal commercial fishing but also prevents invasion by outsiders seeking timber, gold, or other forest resources. By linking economic opportunity to environmental management, UNIVAJA is demonstrating how Traditional Ecological Knowledge and community-based conservation approaches can transform historically exploited natural areas. Today, interest has grown, and the Mayoruna Indigenous Peoples of the Middle Javari and Middle Curuçá have replicated the model. Proper management of the initiative could ensure a reliable source of income and food security for people living in the lake regions, particularly along the middle courses of large rivers. Scaled effectively, the model also has the potential to become a blueprint for sustainable development in other parts of the Amazon.

KEY IMPACTS

Generating economic alternatives through *pirarucu* management in the TIVJ



- UNIVAJA launched an economic alternative in sustainable fishing with the Kanamari Indigenous Peoples of the Middle Javari River.
- The model was replicated by the Mayoruna Indigenous Peoples of the Middle Javari and Middle Curuçá rivers.
- UNIVAJA's initiative supported an increased *pirarucu* population, with the recovery of fish stocks in the Middle Javari and Middle Curuçá rivers.
- The initiative increased incomes for Indigenous communities involved.

Demarcating TIVJ's borders

The *Terra Indígena Vale do Javari* (TIVJ) was previously demarcated in 2001. However, in the space of two decades, the signs and monuments along its borders were swallowed up by the forest. This situation is particularly evident in the southern limit, where a stretch of more than 400 kilometres is undefined by rivers or other bodies of water. To support its monitoring and surveillance, UNIVAJA took on the challenge of marking TIVJ's borders.

Although specialized companies typically handle this type of work, UNIVAJA formed and conducted the operations with teams of local community members. In five missions lasting approximately six to eight weeks each, over 200 kilometres of the most vulnerable areas were re-demarcated. Over the course of two years, 416 kilometres were demarcated. A team from the Mayoruna-Marubo Indigenous Peoples will soon complete the cleaning of a large part of the remaining boundary. Border demarcation

missions require heavy workloads in remote and rugged forests between the Javari and Juruá basins. Once re-demarcated, the teams return every two years to maintain the line and prevent vegetation from growing along the boundaries.

While visible physical boundaries cannot stop all hunters and fishers, they support awareness of the borders and enable the conditions for effective monitoring. By reopening the border, patrols can be conducted in the most remote part of TIVJ, supporting the monitoring of 20,800 hectares that were previously ungarded. This work has been effective

in preventing the unchecked advancement of farming and logging operations into the TIVJ and preventing land grabbing by enabling the conditions for registering rural environmental records within the Territory. The most critical impact of the activity has been on the attitudes and knowledge of the 65 Indigenous People involved, who feel a deeper connection to and sense of ownership over the most remote areas of the Territory. Demarcation teams and others involved have returned to areas they have not visited for a long time, gaining detailed knowledge of their Territory.

KEY IMPACTS

Demarcating TIVJ's borders

- UNIVAJA teams demarcated 416 kilometres of TIVJ's borders.
- The renewed borders support monitoring on 20,800 hectares.
- A total of 65 Indigenous Peoples worked on reopening trails along the border over a two-year period.



Advancing women's leadership and collective governance

The Indigenous women of UNIVAJA play fundamental roles in preserving cultural traditions and transmitting Ancestral Knowledge in their communities. Often guardians of seed and plant knowledge, women are leaders, healers, caretakers, and farmers. However, formal leadership structures often sideline women, especially in terms of politics and governance. Women also often face social and economic challenges that directly and indirectly affect their autonomy and financial independence — additional factors that prevent them from participating in territorial governance. At UNIVAJA, this dynamic is changing.

Recognizing that territorial defence must include all voices, UNIVAJA has prioritized the active inclusion of women in decision-making, leadership, surveillance, and other activities. Women serve on UNIVAJA's Coordination Committee, which is composed of both men and women elected by local assemblies. Women lead cultural programmes and participate in external advocacy at national and international levels. UNIVAJA's surveillance team includes skills training for women, supporting them in obtaining qualifications to conduct TIVJ monitoring activities.

Currently, UNIVAJA is supporting a project that promotes women's political, economic, and social empowerment through the design and sale of women's cultural and artisanal products. Selling handicrafts at local, regional, and national fairs increases Indigenous women's income, strengthens their financial autonomy, and enhances recognition of Indigenous cultures of the Javari Valley.

The project also includes leadership and business training. Two workshops were held to support education on markets, value chains, quality standards, and commercial business. Additionally, the project included networking among Indigenous women, promoting the sharing of experiences and knowledge. A Women's and Youth Centre was created to serve as a place for women to work on their art, share food, and host events for visitors to the region. The project has illuminated the great diversity of artistic cultures in Javari and today represents an important source of income for Indigenous women.

“We, Indigenous women from the Javari Valley, have historically worked in the fields, planting and harvesting, caring for our sons and daughters, and also helping other sisters to care for their children. We are active in preserving our culture and traditions, making handicrafts that have been exported outside of Indigenous lands, helping us to sustain ourselves with things that we need to buy from non-Indigenous society. And now, we are firmly committed to empowering women beyond these activities. We want to participate in and influence the decisions that seek to define the destinies of our people. And that is why we invite everyone to this powerful round of dialogue committed to the well-being of current and future generations.”

— Rosanete Reis Rufino, Secretary, Marubo Association of São Sebastião (AMAS) and Women’s Project Coordinator, UNIVAJA

KEY IMPACTS

Advancing women’s leadership and collective governance



- UNIVAJA integrated women into its leadership structure.
- UNIVAJA launched initiatives to support women’s art and artisanal products.
- UNIVAJA and its partners established the Women’s and Youth Centre, where handicrafts are sold.
- Women are participating more consistently in political advocacy.
- Women’s income has increased through the sale of handicrafts.

Supporting legal advocacy and defence of Indigenous rights

UNIVAJA is building a robust legal advocacy arm led by Indigenous lawyers trained in both state laws and customary protocols to translate field evidence into institutional action. UNIVAJA’s legal strategy starts at the grassroots level. When its protection team identifies a violation, such as illegal fishing, mining, or unauthorized access, it documents the case and files formal complaints with the Brazilian Federal Prosecutor’s Office, FUNAI (National Foundation for Indigenous Lands), and state environmental agencies. When responses are slow or nonexistent, UNIVAJA escalates the issues by using national media, filing lawsuits, and collaborating with human rights networks to exert top-down pressure. To

date, the team has documented more than 175 illegal acts in the Territory.

During recent attempts to weaken Indigenous land rights in Congress and the Brazilian Supreme Court, UNIVAJA filed amicus briefs, gave public testimony, and mobilized Indigenous leaders across the Amazon to defend constitutional protections.

UNIVAJA has also played a key role in ensuring international visibility of threats in the Javari Valley. They have worked with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, UN Special Rapporteurs, and global observers to highlight Brazil’s failure to defend Indigenous rights. In

2022, following the murder of Indigenous guardian Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips, UNIVAJA's legal team was instrumental in demanding a full federal investigation. They gathered evidence, coordinated witness protection, and ensured that the international community remained engaged long after media attention waned.

Legal advocacy also extends to proactive rights education. UNIVAJA organizes workshops in Indigenous

languages to help communities understand land titles, environmental law, and their constitutional rights and protections. This educational work empowers residents to communicate with authorities, write petitions, and combat misinformation from outsiders. UNIVAJA's legal team collaborates with public defenders, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and progressive state actors, but remains anchored in Indigenous leadership and perspectives.

KEY IMPACTS

Supporting legal advocacy and the defence of Indigenous rights

- UNIVAJA documented and recorded complaints for 175 illegal acts within the Territory.
- UNIVAJA conducts legal workshops in Indigenous languages.
- UNIVAJA contributes to federal-level investigations.





National policy impacts

The work of União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley or UNIVAJA by its Portuguese acronym) has influenced policy on Indigenous rights, territorial protection, and Amazon governance at local and national levels. As the only Indigenous-led institution systematically monitoring illegal activities in the Javari Valley, UNIVAJA has become a leading intelligence gathering and enforcement body. UNIVAJA's patrol reports have compelled the Brazilian Federal Prosecutor's Office to open several investigations into illegal mining, poaching, and organized crime in the Javari Valley. In 2022, following the murders of Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips, UNIVAJA's legal and communications teams were instrumental in catalyzing a federal-level response, ensuring that the case received full national and international attention.

Contributions to the global agenda

At the global level, UNIVAJA supports the implementation of several critical multilateral agreements, including the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (CBD), the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC), and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (2030 Agenda).

It work influences the CBD, especially Articles 8(j) and 10(c), which recognize Indigenous Knowledge and governance in biodiversity protection, the UNFCCC, through territorial defence that prevents deforestation and contributes to climate mitigation, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water), 13 (Climate Action), 15 (Life on Land), and 16 (Peace and Justice). UNIVAJA has submitted documentation to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and the UN Human Rights Council detailing the Brazilian State's failures in protecting uncontacted Indigenous groups and ecological defenders in the Javari.

UNIVAJA has also contributed directly to national debates on constitutional protections for Indigenous Territories, providing legal testimony, presenting briefs, and speaking publicly against legislative threats to land demarcation. Their leadership helped influence opposition to the controversial *Marco Temporal* (Time Frame) bill, which would severely limit Indigenous land claims.

Locally, UNIVAJA promotes policy by embedding Indigenous law into municipal planning. In Atalaia do Norte, where UNIVAJA is based, the organization successfully advocated for the creation of local laws prohibiting unauthorized river traffic near the Territories of uncontacted groups and helped develop emergency health protocols for health clinics.

UNIVAJA's efforts have helped shape global narratives about Indigenous sovereignty. The association collaborates with other Indigenous organizations across the Amazon Basin to promote regional enforcement of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the protection of transboundary ecosystems. They are contributing to a growing vision of Indigenous Peoples as stewards not only of local territories, but of shared planetary futures.

UNIVAJA filed complaints with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to urge the Commission to require the Brazilian State to adopt the necessary measures to protect the rights to life and personal integrity of Bruno Araújo Pereira and Dom Phillips. Based on this international complaint, the Brazilian Government launched a search for the missing with members of the Indigenous community, and the group was able to locate the bodies of Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips.



REPLICATION, SCALABILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

“We hunt, gather, and cultivate a rich agricultural harvest. We plant cassava, potatoes, corn, cotton, annatto, genipapo, palm trees, peach palm, açai, and much more. And everything we do consumes no more than what is necessary for our sustenance. We are always concerned with conservation, because we want to live in and from the forest, collectively and sustainably. This is our tradition, our village life. We want to be with you Nawas (white people), learning, but we also want you to learn from us.”

— Bené Donu Mayuruna, President, General Organization of the Mayuruna Grassroots Association (OGM)

Replication

Although the work of União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley or UNIVAJA by its Portuguese acronym) is exclusively rooted in the cultural and geopolitical context of the Javari Valley, its strategies have inspired replication throughout Brazil and the Amazon Basin in general. Through exchanges, media visibility, and formal partnerships, UNIVAJA has supported the creation and strengthening of Indigenous surveillance teams, legal advocacy structures, and cultural

preservation initiatives in other territories. Its Indigenous Territorial Surveillance Team (*Equipe de Vigilância Territorial Indígena* or EVU by its Portuguese acronym) model has been studied at knowledge exchanges and adapted by Indigenous communities in the states of Acre, Roraima, and Pará. UNIVAJA shares protocols on patrol planning, documentation standards, and security risk management to support community-driven design and culturally embedded enforcement.

Scalability

UNIVAJA's influence is expanding through political impact, monitoring, and advocacy. Its work has been cited in national legal proceedings, presented in international climate reports and recognized by civil society networks from Latin America to Europe. As Brazil reforms its approach to Indigenous participation, UNIVAJA's governance model and territorial monitoring protocols are gaining recognition as components of a scalable, rights-based conservation framework.

Its land monitoring project is expanding, with highly trained and qualified regional teams. These teams conduct surveillance through river and land expeditions, using a medium-sized vessel as a mobile base, equipped with a smaller support vessel. This mobile base has all the necessary infrastructure for the expeditions, such as energy supply (photovoltaic and fuel), communication (radio, internet, messaging, and satellite phone), satellite location (GPS with tracking), recording equipment

(smartphones with MAPEO app). A dashboard with data collected during the expeditions is being constructed, which will enable online monitoring of the TIVJ conditions. A technical team composed of Indigenous Peoples has also been established to provide support for activities. This was made possible thanks to the financial contribution from well-structured and consolidated partnerships over time. Several national and regional platforms are now exploring how to institutionalize community surveillance

and support Indigenous-led biodiversity data systems like those implemented by UNIVAJA.

UNIVAJA is also working with academic partners to create a training hub for Indigenous environmental defenders. Their model shows that Indigenous governance is not only effective but efficient, legitimate, and scalable when supported with the right tools, legal protections, and autonomy.

Sustainability

UNIVAJA is governed by assemblies that ensure that decisions reflect community priorities, cultural norms, and ecological realities. This legitimacy sustains commitment even in the face of adversity. UNIVAJA trains and mentors young people in its operations, from legal advocacy to drone operation. Investment in training builds autonomy, with young people becoming the next leaders, ensuring that institutional knowledge is continually transmitted.

While UNIVAJA receives funding and technical assistance from national and international allies, it retains operational independence. The alliance prioritizes donor alignment with Indigenous values and rejects partnerships that compromise autonomy. It also seeks to manage resources sustainably. For example, logistics in the Javari

Valley Indigenous Territory (or TIVJ by its Portuguese acronym) are highly complex and all transportation is primarily carried out by river, which requires a high consumption of fossil fuels. With this in mind, UNIVAJA has been pursuing alternatives such as building and testing electric boats, using drones, and optimizing travel schedules by grouping different activities using common routes. UNIVAJA has been reviewing its governance structure with the aim of institutionalizing and strengthening the organization and the regional Indigenous movement by creating mechanisms for efficient and effective management, thus maintaining its capacity to generate financial resources. It even conducted its first external audit in 2023.

FUTURE PLANS

The União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari is working to shape a future based on cultural preservation and self-sufficiency. While continuing to monitor and defend the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory (TIVJ), UNIVAJA plans to strengthen its organizational capacity and support socio-productive initiatives that reduce dependence on inconsistent and often underfunded government programmes. The centrepiece of this effort is the development of a Territorial and Environmental Management Plan for Indigenous Lands (*Plano de Gestão Territorial e Ambiental de Terras Indígenas* or PGTA by its Portuguese acronym). PGTA's are participatory blueprints that articulate the plan of an Indigenous Territory for land management, environmental care, and sustainable development as well as demonstrating ways of life and visions for the future. It is a tool for community planning and the protection of Ancestral Lands, but also a political declaration that affirms Indigenous autonomy, as enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

PARTNERS

- **Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, APIB):** Supports Indigenous advocacy and mobilization, promoting the unification and visibility of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil nationally and internationally.
- **Centro de Trabalho Indigenista (Indigenous Work Centre, CTI):** Contributes to political and advocacy efforts, echoing the voices of the Indigenous Peoples in the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory.
- **Conselho Indigenista Missionário (Indigenous Missionary Council, CIMI):** Offers legal support, advocacy support, and political solidarity for Indigenous rights in national and international forums.
- **Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira (Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon, COIAB):** Umbrella organization that expands UNIVAJA's political work and facilitates connections with other Indigenous alliances in the Brazilian Amazon.
- **Full Circle Foundation:** Provides funding support for the expansion of UNIVAJA's technical and operational capacity.
- **Fundo Casa Socioambiental (Socio-Environmental House Fund):** Provides financial support for the expansion of UNIVAJA's technical and operational capacity.
- **Government of Brazil, Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship:** Provides financial support for the expansion of UNIVAJA's technical and operational capacity.
- **Nia Tero Foundation:** Provides funding support for the expansion of UNIVAJA's technical and operational capacity.
- **Observatório dos Direitos Humanos dos Povos Indígenas Isolados e de Recente Contato (Observatory of the Isolated and Recently Contacted Indigenous Peoples, OPI):** Collaborates with UNIVAJA to document, monitor, and protect the territories of voluntarily isolated groups.
- **Rainforest Foundation of Norway:** Provides funding support for the expansion of UNIVAJA's technical and operational capacity.
- **Re:Wild:** Provides funding support for the expansion of UNIVAJA's technical and operational capacity.



SOURCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, APIB). 'Marco Temporal.' [Website]. n.d. Available online [here](#).

Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, APIB). 'Setbacks on Indigenous Rights in Brazil.' [PDF]. n.d. Available online [here](#).

Centro de Trabalho Indigenista (Indigenous Work Centre, CTI). 'Consolidating Territorial and Environmental Management in Indigenous Lands.' [PDF]. 2025. Available online [here](#).

Centro de Trabalho Indigenista (Indigenous Work Centre, CTI). 'Proteção e isolamento em perspectiva' ('Protection and isolation in perspective'). [PDF]. 2021. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

Collyns, D. 'Javari valley: the lawless primal wilderness where Dom Phillips went missing.' The Guardian. 2022. Available online [here](#).

Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira (Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon, COIAB). 'Amazônia Indígena COIAB: Uma história de luta.' ('Indigenous Amazon COIAB: A history of struggle') [Website]. n.d. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. 'Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*). 1996. Available online [here](#).

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. 'Yellow-spotted River Turtle (*Podocnemis unifilis*). 1996. Available online [here](#).

Observatório dos Direitos Humanos dos Povos Indígenas Isolados e de Recente Contato (Observatory of the Human Rights of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indigenous Peoples, OPI). 'Quem são os povos indígenas isolados?' ('Who are the Isolated Indigenous Peoples?'). n.d. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

Phillips, T. 'How the final journey of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira ended in tragedy.' The Guardian. 2022. Available online [here](#).

Povos Indígenas no Brasil. 'Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas (Funai)' (National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (Funai)'). 2024. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

Terra Indígenas no Brasil. 'Terra Indígena Vale do Javari' ('Javari Valley Indigenous Land'). Instituto Sociomambiental ISA. n.d. [Online data dashboard]. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

Globo.com. 'Vale do Javari: entenda por que a região se tornou um dos locais mais perigosos da Amazônia.' ('Javari Valley: understand why the region has become one of the most dangerous places in the Amazon'). 2022. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

UNIVAJA. 'UNIVAJA.' [Website homepage]. n.d. (In Portuguese). Available online [here](#).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Equator Initiative acknowledges with gratitude all members of União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (UNIVAJA), particularly Jaqueline de Araújo Vieira, Laura Ferreira Macêdo, Orlando de Moraes Possuelo, John Reid, Eriverto da Silva Vargas, and Luisa Suriani for their insight and support. All photos courtesy of UNIVAJA. Maps courtesy of United Nations Geospatial Information Section and Wikipedia.

Editors

Contributing Editors (União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari): Jaqueline de Araújo Vieira, Laura Ferreira Macêdo, Orlando de Moraes Possuelo, John Reid, Eriverto da Silva Vargas, Luisa Suriani

Contributing Editors (Equator Initiative): Alina Klimantovych, Anna Giulia Medri, Veronika Seemann

Writer

Meredith Beaton

Design

Kimberly Koserowski

Suggested citation

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 'União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari, Brazil.' *Equator Initiative Case Study Series*. 2025. New York, NY.



Equator Initiative
Sustainable Development Cluster
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
304 East 45th Street, 15th Floor
New York, NY 10017
www.equatorinitiative.org

UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet. Learn more at undp.org or follow at @UNDP.

The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses, and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities.

©2025 Equator Initiative
All rights reserved



Convention on
Biological Diversity



FORDHAM
THE JOSEPH P. KATZ SCHOOL OF
POLITICAL SCIENCE



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



pci media impact



UNITED NATIONS
FOUNDATION

