

# CHANGING PLANET



## The 'discovery' of Machu Picchu 100 years ago

In [Changing Planet](#) August 8, 2011 [1 Comment](#)



[Joanna Eede](#)



A hundred years ago in Peru, a tall history professor from Yale University left his camp in a valley northwest of Cusco, and walked through cloud forest to a mountain ridge more than 7,500 feet above sea level. There, high above the roaring Urubamba river, he found an ancient stone citadel; sculpted terraces of temples and tombs, granite buildings and polished walls that were covered in centuries of vines and vegetation.

Hiram Bingham had stumbled across the Inca site of Machu Picchu, the site he believed to be the 'Lost city of the Incas'. 'Machu Picchu might prove to be the largest and most important ruin discovered in South America since the days of the Spanish conquest,' he wrote in the 1913 edition of the National Geographic.

But his words were misleading. Bingham hadn't 'discovered' Machu Picchu. Nor was it 'lost'. He may have alerted it to the western scientific world - for there were no accounts of it in the chronicles of the Spanish invaders - but local tribes must have been aware of its existence. Yet Christopher Heaney, a Fellow at the University of Texas and author of a book on Hiram Bingham, claims the historian was amazed to discover an indigenous family close to the citadel. 'When he climbed the mountain he was very surprised to find an Indian family at the top of the ridge,' he said. Why Bingham was surprised is bewildering in itself.

It is unlikely that his terminology had adverse ramifications for the local indigenous peoples, but the language of colonists has long had a tragic part to play in the destruction of tribal peoples across the world. For centuries, tribal lands have been referred to as 'empty' in order to justify their theft for commercial, military or conservation reasons. After all, if a region is uninhabited, so the expedient thinking goes, there are by definition no human rights to address. Similarly, racist prejudices - the labeling of tribal peoples as 'backward', 'uncivilised' or 'savage' - have inculcated a popular attitude of disrespect and fear, so underpinning (and even justifying, in the perpetrator's mind), the appalling treatment to which tribal peoples have been subjected.

When European settlers landed on the shores of Australia, they claimed the land was 'terra nullius' - land belonging to no-one. It wasn't. The Aborigine people had lived there for perhaps 50,000 years yet the concept of 'terra nullius' was only properly overthrown in 1992, allowing the lands to be stolen legitimately

from the people who had first occupied the continent. Under British colonial law, Aboriginal people had no rights; they were deemed too primitive to be owners. In just over 100 years from the first invasion, the Aboriginal population was reduced from an estimated one million to only 60,000.

Similarly, when the trade winds carried Christopher Columbus to the 'New World' in 1492, he had in fact arrived in the homelands of peoples who had lived there for millennia: tribes who had their own successful laws, rituals, beliefs, values, ways of life and religions. The Yanomami, for example, are thought to have lived in the rainforest of Brazil and Venezuela for approximately 15,000 years. 'The whites shout out today, "We discovered the land of Brazil,"' says Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami spokesman, 'as if it were empty! As if human beings hadn't lived in it since the beginning of time!' a thought echoed by Megaron Txukarramae, a Kayapo Indian when he said, 'The land that the whites called Brazil belonged to the Indians. You invaded it and took possession of it.'

The reality of course is that South and North America were not 'new', Australia was not 'empty' before Europeans arrived and Machu Picchu was not 'discovered' in 1911. 'The phrase 'discovery' of America is obviously inaccurate,' wrote the linguist and philosopher Professor Noam Chomsky. 'What they discovered was an America that had been discovered thousands of years before by its inhabitants. Thus what took place was the invasion of America – an invasion by a very alien culture.'

These lands were the homes of indigenous peoples. They still are. To claim a land was 'empty' before the invasion of colonists and 'discovered' once they arrived is to rob tribal peoples of their identity, dignity and land rights; it is to deny their very existence. 'If you take my land away from me, you take my life,' said Marcus Veron, a Guarani-Kaiowa man from Brazil.

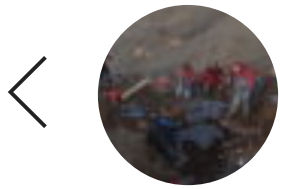


## MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including *Portrait of England* (Think Publishing, 2006) and *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the

chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.

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**Daniel Buck** • 7 years ago

The word "discover" has many meanings, and does not necessarily mean that the thing was absolutely unknown, just relatively unknown in one way or another. Yes, there's nothing more irritating than some outsider claiming to have discovered a great Italian restaurant in your neighborhood that you had known about for years; or worse, Columbus showing up at your door claiming to have discovered your island, and that it -- and you -- now belong to Queen Isabella I



How sorry to Queen Isabella I.

The Incas, an imperial power in their own right, did the same thing to their neighbors -- discovered, conquered, and subjugated them. In that cruel twist of fate that history deals out on a regular basis, the encounter between the Incas and the Spaniards was a clash between two imperial powers, the former on its way down and the latter on its way up. History is like that.

Anyway, back to Bingham. He found, cleared, photographed, studied and made known to the outside world a marvelous archaeological site, one that had been abandoned and for all practical purposes forgotten. In the early 1900s, Peruvian scholars declared Bingham the "scientific discoverer" of Machu Picchu. Fair enough.

Yes, Bingham had a healthy ego and sharp elbows, but most successful explorers do. As Peter Drucker said, "Whenever anything is being accomplished, it is being done, I have learned, by a monomaniac on a mission."

Speaking of monomaniacs, the conquistadors were aware of Machu Picchu's existence. Per Catherine Julien, "Inca Estates and the Encomienda," ANDEAN PAST, vol. 6, Machu Picchu was part of Hernando Pizarro's encomiendas.

Dan

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