

‘Amazonia, you beauty!’ How the murders of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira renewed the fight for Brazil’s forests



Indigenous people of Brazil protest about the murders of British journalist Dom Phillips (pictured left) and his guide, Bruno Pereira. Photograph: Cris Faga/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Six months on, is something positive coming from the killings that shocked the world?

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Sunday 5 June started peacefully for Dom Phillips. The British journalist was in the rainforest on a reporting trip for his book, *How to Save the Amazon*. Just after dawn he got in a small launch with his friend and guide, Bruno Pereira, and they travelled up the Itaquai River, only the sound of the birds and the motor breaking the comforting silence. But then they were ambushed and both men were shot dead. The killers, angry at Pereira for trying to stop their illegal fishing racket, dragged their bodies into the forest and buried them.

The murders hit headlines around the world and shone a light on a region where violence has soared since rightwing president Jair Bolsonaro took power on 1 January 2019. After a slow response, Brazilian police, with the considerable assistance of the Indigenous local people, took action and three people are in jail awaiting trial for the killings. Another man identified as the possible intellectual author of the crime was released from custody in October and is under house arrest.

The murder of a universally liked journalist and a highly respected Indigenous activist was a shock, but it has brought people together in unimaginable ways. Hundreds of Phillips' friends and family exchanged hugs and stories at services in Rio de Janeiro and London. DJs who knew him from his time editing Mixmag held tribute nights. And universities are hosting conferences on the issues Phillips and Pereira's deaths brought to the world's attention.

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Murals went up around the world; T-shirts bearing their likenesses were posted all over social media; and the words of Phillips' last Instagram post, "Amazonia, you beauty", became a catchphrase for those appreciative of the region's allure.

A crowdfunding campaign raised money for the families they left behind. Films are in the works, and five writers have been approached to produce the chapters that will finish Phillips' book. Publication is now set for 2024.

The pair's influence has been felt on a grand scale, too. When they died, Bolsonaro slandered them, suggesting they only had themselves to blame for travelling in a dangerous region. The murders – combined with a growing awareness of the climate crisis – led to a renewed focus on the Amazon, and perhaps even contributed to Bolsonaro's defeat in this October's general election. Leftist challenger Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva beat the incumbent in a tightly fought runoff after promising to put the environment and climate crisis at the centre of his agenda.

Deforestation hit a 15-year high under Bolsonaro, and Lula has vowed to repeat the success of his earlier Workers' party government, when deforestation was slashed by more than 80%. He even vowed to create a Ministry of Native Peoples and appoint an Indigenous leader to run it.

Those decisions were welcomed by people close to Phillips, and while the attention showered on the humble 57-year-old from Merseyside has been more bitter than sweet, his Brazilian wife and British family have tried to take something positive from the tragedy. "The personal tributes, the obituaries, the films, the exhibitions, all of them honouring him, it is hugely moving," says Sian Phillips, Dom's sister.

"He was not an egotist and I keep thinking of him saying: 'Oh no, it's me in the news again.' But on the other hand, because people are talking about the Amazon ... that would have been the best response from this situation for him. It would be at least something."