



Dom Phillips' widow Alessandra Sampaio joins hands with members of the Matis and Marubo peoples around a kapok tree during a visit to Indigenous communities. Photograph: João Laet/
The Guardian

‘We want to forge ahead’: grief and defiance as Dom Phillips’ widow journeys to site of his death

The Guardian journalist and his Brazilian colleague, Bruno Pereira, were shot dead in the Amazon in 2022

by Tom Phillips on the Itaquai river. Photographs by João Laet

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Alessandra Sampaio fell to her knees and wept as she clambered on to the boat's deck and came face to face with the remote riverside clearing where her husband's life was extinguished and hers turned upside down.

The sound of Sampaio's lament mixed with birdsong and the voice of an Indigenous shaman echoed through the jungle where the British journalist, Dom Phillips, and his Brazilian comrade Bruno Pereira were shot dead in June 2022.

"Dom and Bruno are here! Save them! Their spirits are lost here! We can't see them but they are here!" the 85-year-old medicine man, César Marubo, cried out, imploring his people's God and creator, Kana Voã, to guide their souls towards paradise.

"Take them by the hand and lift them up into heaven!" Marubo pleaded, his eyes also filling with tears.



Alessandra Sampaio weeps as she visits the site where her husband, Dom Phillips, was ambushed and killed in 2022. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

On the riverbank before them, framed by Amazonian money trees laden with bright red fruit, two wooden crosses marked the spot where Phillips and Pereira were ambushed and murdered, allegedly by a trio of illegal fishers who are in prison awaiting trial.

“What I most want is to leave this pain behind,” Sampaio had said the previous evening, as she prepared to make her first journey to the place where Phillips’s final reporting mission came to a sudden end.

Sampaio’s visit, marking the two-year anniversary of a crime that shocked the world, was part of a deeply personal quest to come to terms with the loss of her husband, a longtime Guardian reporter who was writing a book about the Amazon when he was killed.

“I’m not angry. I’ve never felt anger, I just miss him so much,” said Sampaio, who wears the wedding ring recovered from her husband’s body around her neck.

But the pilgrimage was also designed to announce the creation of [the Dom Phillips Institute](#), which will honour the journalist’s legacy through educational initiatives raising awareness of the complexities and magnificence of the Amazon and its original inhabitants.

“We don’t want to be frozen in pain and frustration. We want to forge ahead,” Sampaio said as she journeyed by boat along the Itaquai river towards the shrine activists have built at the scene of the crime. “We must transform this pain into a positive movement – and give new meaning to everything that happened.”



Sampaio: ‘I’m not angry. I’ve never felt anger ... I just miss him so much.’ Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

Sampaio said the institute would be guided by the qualities for which her husband was known: tenderness, a burning desire to listen, and respect for diversity and life.

“I think that if Dom was here talking to me now he’d say: ‘Go Alê: move forwards, learn more, make contacts, help to echo this message about this incredible thing that is the Amazon and all of its beauties,’” Sampaio said before travelling to the memorial on the same vessel Indigenous searchers used in their dogged 10-day battle to find Phillips and Pereira after they disappeared while heading to the rivertown of Atalaia do Norte.

Members of those search teams accompanied Sampaio during last week’s visit to pay tributes of their own.

“It was such a tragedy and we are here to celebrate them,” said Binin Carlos Matis, an Indigenous activist who worked with Pereira trying to defend his

ancestral home in the Javari valley Indigenous territory, a Portugal-sized sprawl of jungle that is home to the world's largest concentration of isolated peoples.

Orlando Possuelo, an Indigenous expert who helped coordinate the search operation and continues to work in the region, hoped the memorial would also remind frontline activists of the dangers that their struggle to preserve the Amazon involved. "We don't want the Javari valley to be filled with crosses," he said.



Dom Phillips, left, and Bruno Pereira. Composite: João Laet/AFP/Getty Images (left); Daniel Marenco/Agência O Globo (right)

The headquarters of Possuelo's Indigenous monitoring group, Evu, in Atalaia do Norte was the first stop on Sampaio's two-day tour of the isolated rainforest region near Brazil's tri-border with Colombia and Peru.

There, she heard distressing reports about the ongoing assault on the Javari valley territory where illegal fishers, poachers, miners and drug traffickers continue to operate despite government pledges to crack down. "There are 300 points of invasion," Possuelo told Sampaio, pointing to a map peppered with coloured dots denoting the different threats.



Alessandra Sampaio meets members of the Marubo and Matis peoples in the Amazon rivertown of Atalaia do Norte. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

Days earlier Evu activists had chased off a gang of five poachers who had invaded the protected Indigenous territory, confiscating tapir and peccary meat and hundreds of tracajá river turtles they were trying to smuggle out and sell. On the eve of Sampaio's arrival, an Evu member was assaulted at a local bar – an attack members suspect was motivated by their work.

But Sampaio also heard heartening accounts of how Evu had ramped up its activities in the two years since her husband was killed while reporting on the group's fight to protect Indigenous lives. Evu's membership has doubled to about 40 since Phillips and Pereira were murdered, with plans for a 116-strong force in the coming years patrolling each of the Javari valley's six main waterways.



The Marubo community, which has voiced concerns about the region's future. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

The next day Sampaio visited the base of the Indigenous association Univaja, which served as the nerve centre of the 2022 search effort, to discuss her plans for the institute and ask local leaders how it could help their cause. “They will not silence Dom’s voice,” she told them.

Representatives of the Matis, Marubo and Mayoruna peoples took turns to voice their hopes and fears over the region’s future.

Teacher Nilo Marubo spoke gloomily about how a lack of education and opportunities was driving an exodus of young people from Indigenous villages. “When they arrive in the cities they end up getting mixed up in alcoholism, drugs and even [criminal] factions,” he said.

Marina Mayuruna, a 27-year-old activist, denounced the violence affecting Indigenous women and girls. “Some men will tell you this doesn’t happen. But it does – and it’s the women who suffer,” she told Sampaio.



Marina Mayuruna, an Indigenous leader from the Javari valley region, says women and girls are at risk of violence. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

Clóvis Marubo, a 58-year-old leader, feared younger generations were becoming disconnected from traditional ways of life as western culture marched deeper into the region.

“There’s been such a big change in the past 40 years. We are losing our culture. Our culture is becoming folklore,” he said, ruing how many youngsters no longer knew how to hunt monkeys or peccary, use bows and arrows, or speak their native tongues.

Silvana Marubo lamented the unabating threats to Indigenous activists and their non-Indigenous allies. “I worry who the next Doms and Brunos will be,” she said, telling Sampaio: “Your pain is our pain ... your tears are our tears. Your struggle is our struggle.”

Sampaio listened intently as her Indigenous hosts spoke, engrossed by their oration just as her journalist husband had been. At times tears rolled down her cheeks. At others she smiled and laughed, radiating hope and admiration as she heard their petitions.

Outside, Phillips’s 53-year-old widow caught constant glimpses of the Amazonian treasures and peculiarities that had so captivated her partner. The

boisterous yellow-rumped cacique birds feasting on mangoes in trees lining the rivertown's streets. Dolphins cavorting in the waters below. The phantasmagoric statues of snakes, jaguars and saints adorning Atalaia do Norte's squares.

One afternoon Sampaio took part in a Matis whipping ritual called mariwin, where men wearing ceramic masks and covered in fern leaves thrash participants with palm stalks to frighten off evil spirits. Sampaio winced as the lash struck her back but vowed to return to the Javari valley to ensure the Dom Phillips institute's first project benefited a place he had loved and where he was lost.



During her two-day visit Sampaio took part in a Matis whipping ritual called mariwin. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

“I don't want to be stuck with this [negative] image of the Javari. For me the Javari is a world waiting to be discovered,” she said, staring out across the bronze-coloured waters where her spouse once roved. “This is a special place for me.”