

‘You’re looking to die’: the Brazil river where illegal fishing threatens lives

Poaching of endangered species flourishes despite widespread outcry – but sustainable fishing could end the violence engulfing the trade

Tom Phillips in *Atalaia do Norte*

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- Javari Valley’s most prized asset is the arapaima, a giant air-breathing fish which Brazilians call the pirarucu and Peruvians know as paiche. Photograph: Mamiraua Institute of Sustainability/AFP/Getty Images

José Maria Batista Damasceno weeps as he describes his decades dodging death in the Brazilian Amazon.

There was the time, along the Japurá River, that an illegal fisherman threatened to butcher him if he didn’t get out of town. “You’d better leave or we’ll harpoon you,” Damasceno remembers being told.



Amazon wild west: where drugs, fish and logging are big money but life is cheap

A few years later he narrowly escaped being ambushed and murdered in another remote corner of the rainforest – just as **Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips** were last year.

“It was really, really heavy,” Damasceno says, breaking down as he describes how the failure of his boat’s engine saved him from running into a group of heavily armed assassins who were lying in wait.

Damasceno isn’t an Indigenous activist or journalist, like Pereira and Phillips, whose killings exposed the environmental battle raging deep in South America’s rainforests.

He is a fishing engineer who has dedicated his life to convincing small riverside communities that sustainable fishing programs will benefit them more than the quick, short-term profits offered by the illegal fishing mafias that pillage the region’s rivers and Indigenous lands.



José Maria Batista Damasceno, the fisheries engineer in charge of the pirarucu fish management project in the São Rafael community, the last stop of Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips, before they were ambushed and killed in a deserted stretch of the Itaguaí River. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

Those efforts to encourage green living have put Damasceno on the wrong side of environmental criminals, yet he insists on fighting on.

“I’ve always relied on God to protect me from evil – and here I am carrying on with my mission,” says the softly spoken sustainable fishing evangelist, who recently travelled to the region where Pereira and Phillips were killed hoping to promote sustainable fishing there.

The world in which Damasceno operates is one of hidden dangers, cut-throat rules and huge illegal profits, where **highly organized gangs of poachers with suspected ties to international drug trafficking groups** prey on endangered Amazon species such as the pirarucu.

In the wake of last year’s killings, members of Jair Bolsonaro’s far-right government portrayed the crime as the fruit of a local conflict unconnected to the devastation inflicted on the Amazon by his anti-environmental policies and dismantling of Indigenous protections.

But the killings exposed a far uglier reality: the rampant and highly lucrative illegal trade in fish and wildlife that plagues Brazil's isolated and lawless tri-border with Colombia and Peru.

At the centre of that trade is Atalaia do Norte, the shabby, poverty-stricken river town where Pereira and Phillips began their final journey on 2 June last year.



The port of Atalaia do Norte, where Pereira and Phillips began their journey together last year. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

As the nearest town to the entrance of the Javari valley territory, Brazil's second largest Indigenous reserve, Atalaia serves as a base for the Indigenous activists on whose work Phillips was reporting when he was killed. Its potholed streets offer an astonishing snapshot of the cultural and linguistic diversity of a region which is home to six **Indigenous peoples**, including the Matis and the Marubo, as well as 16 groups with little or no contact with the outside world.

But in recent years Atalaia has also become a key part of **a transnational poaching network with suspected links to the drug factions** who move vast quantities of Peruvian cocaine through what police now consider Brazil's second most important drug smuggling route.

After visiting Atalaia last year, congressional investigators concluded that “heavily armed and wealthy criminal associations” and “highly dangerous criminals” had set up camp in the region, bankrolling groups of illegal fishermen who plunder the protected waters and forests of the Indigenous reserve where wildlife is more abundant.

“We are certain that illegal fishing in the Javari valley region isn’t about river-dwellers trying to make a living but actually much larger organizations, making sizable investments and outrageous profits,” the investigators **wrote**.

Bruno Pereira’s attempts to fight that illegal trade by organizing Indigenous patrol teams put him on a collision course with such criminals. “It’s because of this that Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira were killed,” a friend and former colleague, Armando Soares, told Forbidden Stories, the Paris-based non-profit coordinating the Bruno and Dom project. Earlier this year police named an alleged local illegal fishing boss as the mastermind behind the crime.

The Javari valley’s most prized asset is the arapaima, a giant air-breathing fish which Brazilians call the pirarucu and Peruvians know as paiche. One of the world’s largest freshwater fish, the arapaima can grow up to three metres (10ft) in length and often weighs about 90kg (200lb). It is considered a delicacy in major Latin American cities such as Lima, São Paulo and Bogotá.

Years of unregulated overfishing have pummeled arapaima stocks in the waters outside the Javari’s protected Indigenous lands – which outsiders are forbidden from entering without permission and where commercial fishing is banned. As a result poachers have increasingly taken to invading the territory to extract huge boat-fulls of the fish, as well as a river turtle called the tracajá.



A boat filled with pirarucu which was seized and picked up by police. The prized fish can grow up to 10ft in length. Photograph: Cícero Pedrosa Neto/Amazônia Real

“They use small boats and travel in small groups,” said Orlando Possuelo, an Indigenous expert who is continuing Pereira’s work with the patrol groups battling to thwart such invaders. “They are specialists in the area. Many of them were born in there [before the territory was officially created in 2001] so it’s not easy to find them.”

After being smuggled out of the Indigenous territory in wooden barges packed with ice, the fish are sold in a constellation of border towns including Leticia in Colombia, Islandia in Peru and Benjamin Constant, an edgy river town near Atalaia named after one of the founders of the Brazilian republic.

A year-long investigation by Forbidden Stories found that the illegal trade continues to flourish in the tri-border region between Brazil, Colombia and Peru, despite government pledges to stamp out environmental crime following last year’s killings. None of the three countries there have rigid controls over the origin of the arapaima being sold.

Brazil has yet to reopen the offices of its environmental agency, Ibama, in Tabatinga, the city nearest to the Javari, after it was shut down in 2019. Peru's regional production department has no fishing inspectors in Santa Rosa de Yavarí, the Peruvian town across the river from Tabatinga. And Colombian authorities do not control the quantity of fish being caught by the 40 companies registered to operate in Leticia, on the Colombian side of the border.

Outside scrutiny is unwelcome. "There's nothing here. You're looking to fucking die," one man warned a reporter from Peru's OjoPúblico, one of 16 media outlets involved in the Bruno and Dom project, when he visited a riverside fishing warehouse in the Colombian border town looking for illegal fish.

Activists say the almost complete lack of controls means the illegal fishing trade continues to thrive despite the international scandal caused by the killings of Pereira and Phillips.

"I don't think anything has changed," said Possuelo, remembering how Indigenous activists received reports of illegal poachers operating within the Javari territory even in the days after the two men vanished on 5 June last year.

Despite the risks, Damasceno said he was determined to continue with his crusade to bring sustainable fishing to some of the most isolated and dangerous corners of the Brazilian Amazon, where he was born and raised.

Pirarucu fish on sale in a market in Leticia, Colombia. Photograph: Gary Calton/The Guardian

Now 65, the fishing engineer plans to retire after what will be his last – and perhaps most difficult – assignment: implementing such projects in São Rafael, São Gabriel and Ladário, the three fishing communities from which the alleged killers of Pereira and Phillips came.

Doing so involves helping those communities set up three different kinds of lakes that will help local pirarucu stocks recover and, hopefully, stop fishermen invading Indigenous lands: "permanent protection lakes" where fishing is forbidden, "maintenance lakes" which local families can fish to feed themselves, and "management lakes" where a quota of up to 30% of adult fish can be legally

extracted after their numbers have reached certain levels. “So if there are 100 fish you can take 30, so stocks can recover,” Damasceno said.

The fishing engineer argued sustainable fishing was the only way to avoid further violence along the Itaquai River and help deprived local families resist the temptation of supplying fish for organized crime. As proof that it was possible, he remembered how the fisherman who once threatened to harpoon him had since embraced sustainable fishing and become a close friend.

“I always say that sustainable fishing is the way out of this kind of conflict. It unites people. It raises awareness. It opens the door to equality, rights and acceptance,” insisted Damasceno, who hopes to retire to write a book about the pirarucu once his mission is complete. He plans to call it: “The union of people and sustainability in the Amazon.”

On a recent trip to the fishing villages near where Pereira and Phillips were killed, Damasceno urged locals to embrace the idea of legal, long-term survival rather than short-term, illegal gain.

“Lift up your heads. You must carry on,” he told them. “Think of your kids.”