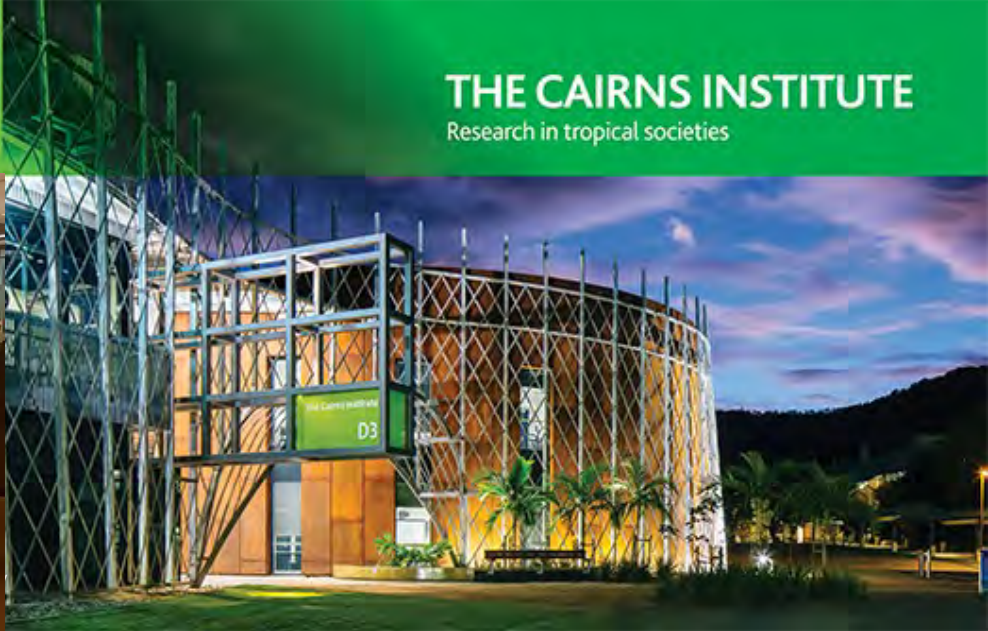




Visitors to the exhibition © Kasia Wojtylak, 2017



Life on the river exhibition

During June 2017 the Institute hosted an ethnographic exhibition entitled “Life on the River Sepik and Amazon: Sepik and Amazon – Ambonwari: Murui”, created by [Anthropological Laboratory for Tropical Audiovisual Research](#) (ALTAR) members Dr Daniela Vávrová, Kasia Wojtylak and Kristian Lupinski.

The lives of the Ambonwari people of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the Sepik and Murui people of Colombia in the Amazon are both defined and made possible by the rivers on which they live. This exhibition explores the idea of life on the river, and the understandings and relationship that we—JCU researchers—have forged with our collaborators and interlocutors in these places.

Both river basins, Sepik and Amazon, share unique but similar ecological features and cultural values. This exhibition showed commonalities and differences through lived experience of life on the river. The themes included canoe making, fishing, hunting, and food preparation, showing how social and ecological domains of people’s lives are tightly interwoven. Through joint collection of photographs, videos, collages, drawings, and personal objects, the exhibition presented fieldwork experiences, research methods, and



Elger Agga and his sons in their newly made canoe, Tercera India Murui & Kristian Lupinski © 2015

collaborative approaches, as well as engaging important ecological and social issues happening in the tropics.

This exhibition was concluded with the International Day of the tropics lecture on 29 June 2017.

Sepik and the Amazon Basins - the comparison: The Sepik River is 1,126 km long. The Sepik Basin covers an area of 80,321 km² or about 17% of PNG. The Sepik rises in the Victor Emanuel Range of the central highlands near Telefomin in Sandaun Province and flows north-westward, crossing the border to Papua (Indonesia), then returning back to PNG. It debouches into the Bismarck Sea.

The Sepik is a network of lagoons, lakes, and grass islands. The tributaries and water veins fluctuate with the rain, and there is a large crocodile population. The diverse habitats of the basin rate as globally significant on a number of biodiversity indices.

The Sepik River Basin is a largely undisturbed environment with no large urban settlements. It is home to approximately 430,000 people who depend almost entirely on products from the rivers and forests for their livelihoods. This is, perhaps, the most linguistically and culturally diverse area in the planet with over 300 languages.

The Sepik River is well known for its extensive artistic tradition. The carvings, musical instruments, household objects, men’s houses, and canoe prows can be seen in numerous museums around the world. As of today, there are no dams or mines operating on the Sepik River. The new copper and gold mine on the Frieda River have been postponed, but only until 2020.

(Continued on page 6)



Life on the river exhibition cont.

(Continued from page 5)

Amazon Basin: The Amazon River is the longest river in the world flowing about 6,900 km. The Amazon Basin covers an area of about 7,500,000 km² or roughly 40% of the South American continent. The Amazon arises in the Peruvian Andes and flows through Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Amazon's vast river network includes 100,000 km of rivers and streams. It is the largest remaining contiguous block of tropical rainforest on the planet. Its rivers contain the largest number of freshwater fish species in the world, and its forests house at least 10% of the world's known biodiversity, including endemic and endangered flora and fauna.

The overall number of people of the forest in the Amazon Basin might have numbered about between 2-5 million before the first contact in 1492 ([Aikhenvald 2012](#)).



The creators of the exhibition (from the bottom): Daniela Vávrová with her son Tommy, Kristian Lupinski, and Kasja Wojtylak © Taaj Townshend

Throughout the last century, this number was reduced to about 200,000 people, caused by introduced diseases, slave trade, and missionisation. Today, the Amazon faces unprecedented development pressures. Dam construction, mining, oil, and gas exploration and exploitation, new accesses, and land-cover changes are increasingly degrading Amazon freshwater ecosystems, disrupting the magnitude and timing of hydrological flows. Across the Amazon, 154 hydroelectric dams are currently in operation, 21 are under construction, and 277 are in the planning stages ([WWF 2015](#)).

For more details on the creators of the exhibition see www.cairnsinstitute.jcu.edu.au/life-on-the-river



Professor Alexandra Aikhenvald opening the exhibition © Daniela Vávrová 2017

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