

Darrell Posey

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In 1977, when the anthropologist Darrell Posey, who has died of a brain tumour aged 53, was offered the opportunity to do field work for his PhD with the Kayapo tribe in Para, in the Brazilian Amazon, he jumped at the chance.

In the village of Gorotire, he found a people with a vast knowledge of their forest and savannah environment, based on the complex relationships between plants, animals, people and the soil. It was an ancient tribal culture of exuberance and complexity, with rituals linked to the forest and the cosmos. But it was also a culture under threat — from logging, dams and the queimadas, the vast infernos used to clear forests for conversion into cattle ranches.

Darrell realised that, while still an academic, he could not stand by and watch this world being destroyed. He felt compelled to participate in the Kayapo's battles to protect their rainforest home.

In one instance, the Gorotire Kayapo acquired a share in a gold mine, and were suddenly in a position to acquire a plane, trucks and a diesel generator. But Darrell was closest to the village traditionalists, the shamans Beptopup and Kuruka, who had taught him Kayapo cosmology, forest management and the use of medicinal plants. He had a deep reverence for these two men, who, he said, taught him more than anybody ever did at university.

In 1987, Darrell made his most audacious move, taking two young Kayapo chiefs to the World Bank in Washington to campaign against a series of hydro-electric dams that would flood their land. The visit became headline news. The Brazilian government was not amused, and, on their return, detained all three. But Darrell was only slightly shaken, and continued investigating whether tribes like the Kayapo could make more efficient use of rainforests than modern cattle ranchers.

The research concluded that the Kayapo enriched, rather than impoverished, their rainforest habitat by introducing food plants and fruit trees into their forest gardens. He and his co-researchers concluded that some of the great plant variety of the Amazon rainforests was, in fact, put in place by the Amazonian tribes.

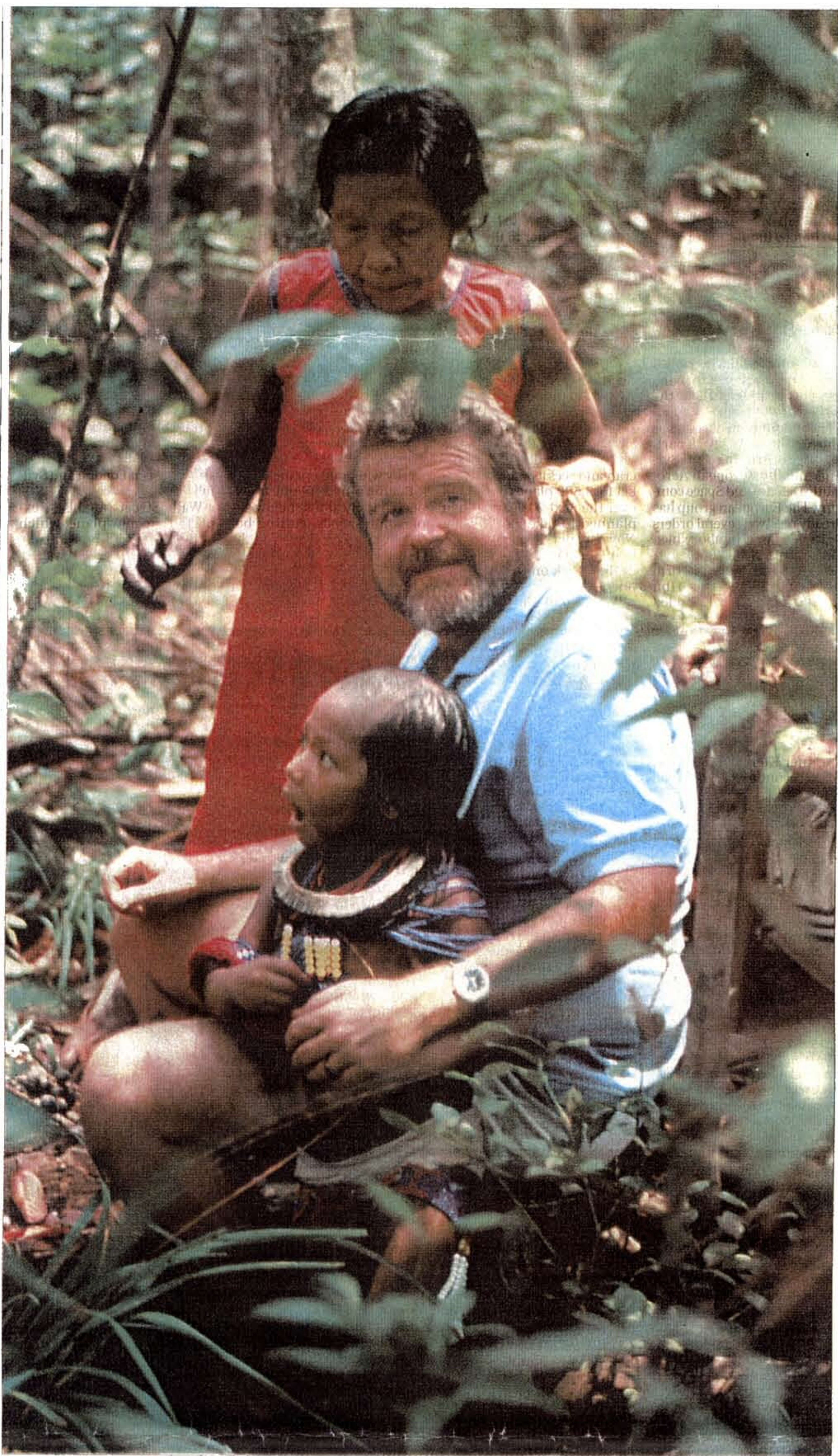
Born on a farm in Kentucky, Darrell studied at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, taking a BSc in entomology and agriculture, and later a master's degree in geography and anthropology. His PhD was awarded in 1979 from the University of Georgia.

Despite his academic credentials, he was sometimes criticised by colleagues who frowned on his involvement with the people he was meant to be studying as a detached observer.

Ethno-ecology, the study of the knowledge and traditions of tribal societies in relation to the environment, was, at the time, a new research focus; and academics still find it hard to cope with the idea that tribal people can teach us much about some of the world's most diverse environments, and more specifically, about their food and medicinal plants.

In contrast to this approach, Darrell argued that Brazil's strategy for developing the Amazon — primarily by removing the forests wholesale — was one of extraordinary folly.

During his years in Brazil, he was largely based at the



Posey . . . in the Amazonian forests with a Kayapo family on an expedition to learn about medicinal plants Photo: Herbert Girardet

Amazon research centre at Museo Goldi, Belem, where he continued his ethnological work. In 1989, he founded the International Society for Ethnobiology, which has grown into a major international forum for both indigenous peoples and academics. Its aim is to enable tribal cultures from across the world to draw attention to their ecological knowledge, and to ensure that this knowledge is protected by intellectual property rights agreements.

Darrell played a central role in having these perspectives included in the Biodiversity Convention, agreed at the 1992 Rio summit. There, he

also instigated the Earth Parliament, bringing together tribal peoples from all over the world to speak about their plight and the significance of their cultures.

After Rio, Darrell made his home in Oxford, as an associate fellow at Linacre College, and research associate at the Oxford Forestry Institute. His most important work was as director of the programme for traditional resource rights at the Oxford Centre for Environment, Ethics and Society, at Mansfield College. But his time there was not easy, and his views were often felt to be a threat by other academics more concerned about their own pro-

fessional advancement than scientific innovation.

Darrell Posey was a truly great man. Many have been influenced by his conference lectures, some 150 papers and the 10 books he wrote and edited. He won a United Nations Global 500 Award for Outstanding Environmental Achievements in 1993, and the US Sierra Club Chico Mendes Award for Extraordinary Courage in the Defence of Nature in 1989. His most recent book, *Cultural And Spiritual Values Of Biodiversity*, edited for the UN Environment Programme in 1999, is testimony to the extraordinary breadth of his interests and his con-

tacts. He also completed a collection of his writings, which will be published soon. Sadly, his autobiography remained unfinished.

Darrell was such great fun, too. I will always recall his ringing laughter, enjoying his own (very good) jokes, and those of others. Even in dark moments, he could come up with wonderfully zany anecdotes. He was never self-important, yet he knew about the importance of his work.

He is survived by his parents and a brother.
Herbert Girardet

Darrell Addison Posey, anthropologist, born March 14 1947; died March 6 2001