

Wayuú

Profile

The Wayuú are the largest indigenous group in Venezuela, and live in the Guajira peninsula in the states of Zulia, Mérida and Trujillo, which border Colombia. In the 2001 national census, they accounted for over half (293,777) of the indigenous population (506,243).

Historical context

Although the Wayuú have traditionally sustained themselves through pastoral activities as well as agriculture and fishing, they are becoming increasingly dependent on commercial activities that threaten Wayuú culture. Jieyuú, or the Network of Wayuú Indigenous Women, was founded in order to address issues facing Wayuú women as well as to re-affirm Wayuú culture more systematically.

Current issues

Since the 1999 constitutional reforms, a number of Wayuú have been elected to the National Assembly and some have benefited in the 2000s from decreases in poverty rates in Venezuela more generally. Still, the most serious threat facing the Wayuú is their location close to the war-torn Colombian border. In 2004 a massacre on the Colombian side of the Guajira peninsula caused the forced migration of hundreds of Colombian Wayuú refugees to Venezuela resulting in a humanitarian crisis. Similarly, Chavez's decision to temporarily cut off commercial relations with Colombia in early 2005 left the Wayuú in despair.