



## World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Venezuela : Wayuú

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### Profile

Wayuú are the largest indigenous people in Venezuela, and live in the Guajira peninsula in the states of Zulia, Mérida and Trujillo, which border Colombia. In the 2011 national census, they accounted for 413,436 people.

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### Historical Context

Wayuú originally lived on the La Guajira peninsula. Their traditional subsistence culture was interrupted by Spanish colonization as early as the 16th century when they transitioned to an economy based largely on the raising of livestock.

In the 19th century, Wayuú began moving from the peninsula to work on sugar cane farms. This emigration increased with the development of Venezuela's oil economy. In 1944, the government relocated several hundred Wayuú to the neighbourhood of Zaruma in Maracaibo.

Although 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.

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 has long been 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 Wayúu in despair.

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## Current Issues

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In February 2015, President Maduro approved an order giving the National Army authority over coal and mineral exploitation in the Zulia state. Much of the land included in this decree is inhabited by Wayúu, who have endured years of confrontation with miners. They organized protests against the coal mining which led to the successful reduction of land affected by the order.

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