Eyes in the Sky
Software and corporate citizenship combine with local activism to make a difference on the ground.

The journey from the September 7th Reserve deep in Brazil’s Amazon forest to Google’s corporate offices in Mountain View, Calif. involves two hours of bumpy dirt road in a four-wheeler, then 10 hours on a bus, and finally 14 hours on three airplane flights.

Amazonian tribal chief Almir Suruí knew it was a crucial step in his struggle to forge a modern alliance he hopes will save his 1,200-member tribe and its 242,811-hectare reserve. The indigenous leader recently asked the folks at U.S. Web giant Google to provide high-quality satellite imagery that will improve the tribe’s monitoring of encroaching loggers and miners. It will be done using a free, publicly available software program called Google Earth, which generates highly detailed three-dimensional maps of the entire planet.

It’s clear that the Brazilian government has failed to stop miners and loggers from entering indigenous reserves. Between 60% and 80% of all logging in the Amazon is illegal, environmentalists say. And the nation’s Indian Affairs Bureau “depends on the understaffed and poorly equipped federal police for law enforcement on indigenous lands,” according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2006 human rights report. Clandestine loggers and miners have killed 11 Suruí chiefs—Suruí is both the common surname and name of the tribe—who tried to prevent them from entering indigenous lands over just the past five years.

With that in mind, Almir—the first Suruí to graduate from college—knew he needed outside help. To Google’s credit, his visit led to a quick decision to get involved. “The Amazon rainforest and its indigenous peoples are disappearing rapidly, which has serious consequences both locally and globally,” Google Earth spokeswoman Megan Quinn told me. “This project can raise global awareness of the Suruí people’s struggle to preserve their land and culture by reaching more than 200 million Google Earth users around the world.”

This is a prime example of corporate good citizenship—and not a first for Google Earth, which has helped other environmental or humanitarian causes. Last year, it joined with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to map out destroyed villages in Darfur, and with the U.N. Environment Program to illustrate 100 areas around the world that have been severely deforested. This year, Google Earth has teamed with Cool Earth, a British group that aims to purchase thousands of hectares of Amazonian rainforest to keep it away from loggers. Contributors will be able to monitor land they helped buy, even individual trees implanted with microchips.

The Suruí hope improved satellite images will strengthen their culture by helping with the cataloging of medicinal plants and mapping out hunting grounds, ancestral cemeteries and sacred sites. Many tribes are slowly losing their rainforest heritage. “We want people to know that these territories are not just empty swaths of green as seen by satellite, but the homes, supermarkets, museums, libraries of a people who depend on these areas for their survival,” says Vasco van Roosmalen, Brazil director for Amazon Conservation Team in Arlington, Va.

The environmental group has provided the Suruí’s 22 villages with laptop computers, handheld global positioning system devices and satellite maps.

Tech-savvy Almir Suruí has long been fighting for his tribe. He challenged the World Bank when its funds destined for indigenous groups didn’t arrive. He sued the Brazilian state of Rondonia after it failed to provide the tribe such basic services as wells and health clinics. He has also encouraged the Suruí to export crops including coffee, Brazil nuts and acai, the latter an Amazon berry rich in nutrients that has become a favorite staple at such U.S. outlets as Jamba Juice.

Yet he fears some Suruí chiefs will succumb, as they have in the past, to huge bribes offered by loggers. “Our plan won’t provide money tomorrow,” he told me. “I am very worried that when the rains stop, loggers will come and offer money, money, money,” he says.

Suruí’s actions have earned him international kudos and matching death threats. There is currently a US$100,000 price on his head; that’s the figure two Suruí youths told him loggers had offered them to kill him. In Washington, Almir asked the Organization of American States to provide him with protection after Brasilia failed to send him bodyguards as promised.

I also hope this unique union inspires Brazil’s government. With the whole world watching on the Web via Google Earth, the Suruí-Google partnership may finally force the government into action.