



Pro-Natura

Member of IUCN, The World Conservation Union

Newsletter

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Enabling the Amerindians of Guyana to cope with change while protecting their forests and heritage



The Hinterland: Central to south-western Guyana (region 9) inhabited predominantly by the Makushi tribe

Bina Hill Institute for Research, Training and Development, Region 9, Guyana - main building.



Pro-Natura, working with the Amerindians since 1999, is helping to launch a training centre, owned and managed by themselves. It is achieving food security, cultural revival, participatory development and resource management. The project helps 4 000 people living in 14 villages.

One of the remaining «frontier» rainforests

Mostly still uncut, Guyana's rainforest covers 80% of the country (about 220,000 km²). Jaguars, giant otters, howler monkeys, macaws and harpy eagles are only some of the abundant wildlife. Low population and meagre international investment have kept the ecosystems and wildlife relatively well preserved.

About 90% of the 700,000 Guyanese live along a narrow strip of coast. Agriculture provides their main support. Amerindians live in small scattered interior settlements, working in subsistence agriculture and mining. ■

People and resources face serious threat IUCN (World Conservation Union)

designated Guyana a biodiversity 'hotspot'. Native people, plants and wildlife are under threat. For the past twenty years, Guyana has been restructuring economically and changing rapidly. Recent pressure on the national government to attract large-scale investments for natural resource exploitation (gold, timber, diamonds and bauxite) is associated with increasing road access. Coincidentally, growing rural poverty has led to an increase in small-scale gold mining, chain saw logging and wildlife trading.

When Pro-Natura began working with the Amerindians, the problems were:

- A critical decrease in wildlife and trees used for local building that threatened traditional essential resources;
- Mining, logging and poaching that threaten the Amerindian way of life;
- A lack of training which is still an ongoing need;
- Migration of youths to work in Brazilian gold mines or as domestic labour. ■

WORLDWIDE, MORE THAN HALF OF RAINFORESTS AND THEIR WEALTH IS ALREADY GONE

Tropical rain forests cover 6% of the planet; yet are home to over 50% of the world's plants and animals. They provide wildlife, timber, non-timber forest products and medicines, support local and national populations help regulate climate, protect biodiversity and watersheds. An estimated 0,6% of the total tropical forest area is lost every year. In the Amazon Basin, the system to which Guyana belongs, deforestation is relentless. Since the 1970's, 15% of the original vegetation has been destroyed, predominately in Brazil.



Dr. Bubier interviewing an elder on her knowledge of medicinal plants.



Virgil Harding broadcasts in Makushi from the Institute radio station.



Teaching youths to plane wood while constructing the Institute.

Amerindian elders hold the knowledge of their environmental resources and their use, an oral tradition that they transmit in their native languages. Largely undocumented, the languages are now relegated as 'old fashioned' and rapidly being lost. Traditional apprenticeships to the elders to learn about the native plants and wildlife, and the cures they hold, are passing out of fashion, in favour of western medicine and practices. Once lost, the keys to this great 'library' of knowledge will be gone forever and disappearance of the resources, the 'library' itself, will not be far behind.

This knowledge must be transmitted to the youth if it is to be preserved and used. For the survival of the forests, young people must continue to live in them. Before the project, the Youth, after the age of thirteen, could only obtain education in far-away Georgetown or Lethem.

Outside influences are rapidly changing the villagers – their way of life, their ambitions and their economic base. Pressures are building up, beginning with the upgrading of the road which crosses Guyana from northeast to southwest, connecting Georgetown to Lethem at the Brazilian border. Outside organizations, often bringing funds, dictate the path of development. The hinterland, where everyone had a role in the subsistence economy, and could live off the land and its riches, quickly suffers because of its minimal cash economy. Roles change and jobs become scarce, especially for the youth. ■

Turning around the situation critical needs demand an appropriate response

These problems led the Amerindian North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDDB), the then fledging elected body representing the communities, to seek assistance to train the young people, and create greater opportunities in the area. The Amerindians, with the help of Pro-Natura, are turning around the odds.

Pro-Natura helped the Amerindians obtain funding from IUCN Netherlands for a new training and development centre. The Elders decided on agriculture as the priority to ensure food security. Youth from 14 villages were selected to obtain in-residence training for two years and then return home to share the knowledge. ■

The Amerindian centre

Indigenous construction: Over three years, the Amerindians built their own centre, by hand. The construction period was used to define priorities in a participative way and train the youth in building skills, which they have since used to construct additional facilities.

Programme and Staff - Responding to Needs: The training programme, set up in 2002, with the help of a second

Community members at Bina Hill lead a training session.

grant, hired a coordinator, an administrator, an agriculturist, an environmentalist, a builder, librarian/computer assistant, a cattle handler and a cook, to deliver on carefully thought-out objectives:

- Cultural Revival
- Local Capacity Building
- Locally Relevant Research
- Economic Development
- Natural Resource Management

The vision was to build alongside the development/training centre, an eco-village to demonstrate agriculture and agro-forestry techniques in integrated systems.

This centre is becoming a natural resource management centre, playing a leading role for development in the region with a focus on providing support for new micro-enterprise businesses.

Initial Two Years: The Amerindian Centre, now named the Bina Hill Institute for Research, Development and Training blossomed with 1340 people training from 2002 to 2004 in everything from agriculture to financial management to computing, survey techniques, map making and GIS skills. Computers are powered by solar energy. An Internet service earns money from the local people. A community radio station, funded by UNESCO and run by volunteers broadcasts part of the time in Makushi, the indigenous language.

In terms of assets, the herd of cows given to the Centre by local chiefs has grown fourfold. Horses were bought; tractors donated; vegetables planted and drip irrigation installed. A new kitchen, a shop, a bath block, a storage area and some residential rooms are being added.

All members of the communities can obtain training.

Local leaders, including those on the elected North Rupununi District Development Board benefit from training in management, bookkeeping and planning. National and international NGOs, aid agencies and government organizations conducting training in this region now use the Centre, greatly contributing to the Centre's success. Perhaps most significantly, partnerships have been formed with many Government agencies such as the Forestry Commission, Environmental Protection Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture. The Minister of Amerindian Affairs often participates in the bi-monthly meetings and, following a visit to Bina Hill, the President of Guyana generously contributed some of his office's funds to further support the project.

Agroforestry is land-use planning that aims to increase total production by linking agricultural cultivation and animal breeding with that of trees and forest plants using techniques compatible with local cultures and traditions. After J.G. Bene et al, 1978



Training on solar powered computers.

Local teachers take Backyard Ecology courses. Local organizations now have headquarters at the Centre. The Centre hosts consultations on changes in the national constitution, new laws, programmes and development schemes. Most of all, it is a meeting place for Amerindians owned and managed by them. ■

A race for maintaining Amerindian culture while helping them to adapt and improve their standard living

With the upgraded road travel is easier. A new bus service brings many people to the area, no longer a remote place. Traditionally, the Rupununi Region, is a special place where people care for one another. This is the culture the Centre is seeking to preserve. With more people coming to the region, Sydney Allicock, the project coordinator, challenges the young people with the question, 'Will we use the road or will the road use us?'

At the Centre, a remarkable process generated by the Amerindian leaders themselves is the blueprint for training young people. The leaders needed to prepare youth for changes the new road would bring – in particular creating

an ability to deal with potentially huge social changes brought about by immigration from Brazil and business development. Skills taught are aimed at better managing micro-enterprises, accessing information, discriminating between what is fact and what is opinion, and taking initiative and responsibility. Youth who may not have been employable previously are now finding work. Traditional ways are being integrated by inviting the Elders to contribute their knowledge to the agricultural work. A curriculum is gradually being written from interviews with them. ■



Recently upgraded, the road transecting Guyana from Georgetown to Lethem brings new challenges along its way.

Several firsts and a model for other regions

With the technical support of Pro-Natura, this Centre was the first outside of Georgetown to be based in a hinterland Amerindian community, run by Amerindian staff. Other firsts were computers, solar power, training in natural resource management, and vouchers to fund trainers from a national multi-lateral aid scheme designed to support budding entrepreneurs. Even the football team, formed when the Centre opened, is now at the head of the local league.

When the Amerindians in this area recently signed an agreement to manage a tract of state forest, Pro-Natura's forestry advisor worked with them to set up a cooperative, a necessary step for coordinated management and marketing of the wood they will be logging sustainably. Participants in this new community forestry programme must develop a new way of working to be commercially viable. This initiative will be looking for new value added products. The Commonwealth Forestry Association through its Young Forester Award Scheme is placing an experienced volunteer in the project in 2005 to begin building networks and developing skills. ■

The Team

Dr. Norma E. Bubier, Executive Director, Pro-Natura International UK
Mr. Sydney Allicock, Co-ordinator of Bina Hill Institute Programme and Community Leader
Ms. Emily Allicock, Administrator of Bina Hill Institute
Mr. Ben Coleman, Pro-Natura Liaison in Bina Hill Institute

:: IN BRIEF ::

NIGERIA

A Cybercafe with a Vsat satellite connection was set up in February at the Akassa computer training centre in the Niger Delta. Funded by the French Embassy in Nigeria, it is part of the ADEN programme.



We are proud to announce that Mr. Philip Arkell, Project Director of Pro-Natura International (Nigeria) was awarded the first Adeste Prize by Toronto Magazine Jo Lee (for individuals' under-40 for achievements in social fields).

GHANA

In collaboration with the University of Ghana, College of Agriculture, Accra, Pro-Natura is now registering in Ghana as a local NGO. Wilfrid PINEAU is the Executive Director of Pro-Natura International (Ghana), he will carry on being the Co-ordinator of the Agroforestry Training Programme for Africa.

Pro-Natura main contacts

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