

Sustainable Development and Bio-cultural Conservation in the Surinamese Trio and Wayana Border Region

The Office for Sustainable Development and Environment of the Organization of American States (OAS) has launched a project with the Trio indigenous communities in the border region of Brazil and Suriname with the goal to contribute to the conservation of their culture and the sustainable development of the natural resources within their territories. The objective of the OAS project is to promote the conservation of biodiversity and headwaters within the Surinamese Trio territories by consolidating their organizations as the rightful authorities and administrators of these territories. This will be achieved by helping them strengthen their traditional knowledge and internalize and re-value their culture, consequently strengthening their internal, organizational and decision-making structure ("*Shaman institution*"), by promoting capacity-building to develop management plans for the sustainable use of resources, and by assisting them improving their skills to collaborate and negotiate with the government to obtain some formal tenure status of their traditional territories.

In addition to many local benefits, the project offers the potential to provide global environmental benefits; therefore additional financial support will be requested from the Global Environmental Facility, in the form of a medium-sized project (approximately US\$1 million).

The OAS project would be part of the alternative project (OAS, GEF plus other co-finance; here under "the project") in the form that the project would not only incorporate activities that complement the ones include in the OAS project, but it would also intensify the impact of the OAS activities, ensuring its sustainability and replicability.

Background

A large area of the northern Amazon Region, divided by the Surinamese-Brazilian border, is inhabited by the Trio (or Tiriyo or Tareno) people¹. The Guiana Region, of which this area forms part, ranks as one of the prime wilderness areas in the world, consisting mainly of primary tropical rain forest, interrupted by small patches of marsh forest along rivers and creeks. There are exceptional biodiversity stocks at issue in the Guiana Region as a whole, and in the Trio area in particular, which contain a high plant and animal diversity, including several endemic, rare, and internationally endangered species (e.g. blue dart frog, jaguar, cock-of-the-rock, harpy eagle, giant river otter). Within the Guiana Region, there are an estimated 20,000 vascular plant species, of which about 35% (7,000) are endemic, making it one of the three richest tropical wilderness areas on Earth. Bird richness for the whole Guiana Region is estimated at 975 species, with 150 endemics and 25 near-endemics, mammals, at 282 species with 27 endemics, reptiles, at 280 species with 76 endemics, amphibians, at 272 species with 127 endemics, and freshwater fish, at 2200 species with 700 endemics. Invertebrate diversity remains very poorly known, but certainly with numbers in the hundreds of thousands of species, the vast majority of which, are still unknown to science². As point of comparison, within the Trio territories in Suriname alone, bird diversity is estimated at 500 species, mammals at 57 species, reptiles at 140 species, amphibians at 93 species, and fishes at 193 species (Teunissen and Nordam)³.

The Guiana Region is also extremely important in terms of ecosystem services, both regionally and globally. It includes a major portion of the largest river system on Earth, the Rio

¹ Their territory is bounded by 1 and 3 ½ degrees North latitude and 55 and 57 degrees west latitude. The Trio and Wayana population (including some other minor tribes) has been estimated in 3,000 people in the Surinamese side and 4,000 people in the Brazilian side.

² The Guianan Region – A Global Priority. Guayana Shield Priority Setting Workshop, April 2002. At: <http://www.guayanashield.org/>

³ Teunissen, Peter, and Dirk Noordam. 2003. Ethno-ecological survey of the lands inhabited/used by the Trio people of Suriname. ACT.

Amazonas; the southern portion of the third largest river system, the Rio Orinoco drainage; and a series of important watersheds in the Guianas that drain into the Atlantic. The Trio territories in particular correspond closely to the high basin of the rivers Suriname and Sipaliwini. The Guiana Region may account for as much as 10-15% of the world's freshwater, and has the largest number of pristine or near pristine river basins on Earth. It also harbors large stocks of carbon in the living biomass of the forest, accounting for about a quarter of the total carbon pool in tropical forests.

In this sense, the Guiana Region offers a great opportunity for conservation efforts to become involved on a scale no longer possible in most other tropical areas in the world, where widespread over-exploitation of forest resources has already taken place. Unfortunately, the region is coming under the same threats that have greatly reduced or entirely eliminated tropical forests in other parts of the world. As an example, Suriname is highly dependent on resource extraction and agriculture, and bauxite, gold and other minerals production show significant potential and will likely expand in the near future.

Project Rationale

Much of the best-protected rainforest in South America is on Indian lands. It is likely that the total area covered by indigenous lands in the region will eventually be comparable to or larger than that protected in parks and reserves.

Not only do indigenous communities control enormous amounts of territory, they also have an unparalleled knowledge of these resources and how best to manage them. Indigenous peoples living a relatively traditional lifestyle often maintain both physical and spiritual ties to the land. Their relationship with natural resources is based in their cultural heritage of ethical principles, livelihood strategies, and value system. Everything from the quality of drinking water to the availability of foodstuffs to the accessibility of medicinal plants is dependent on the careful stewardship of local resources.

In this sense, indigenous groups may present an extraordinary conservation opportunity. There is growing recognition that viable ecosystem management systems will exist in indigenous land use categories associated with a system of land tenure, inheritance and a traditional normative framework for specific uses of each category, without the environmental community having to create them. From an indigenous perspective, the persistence of healthy and diverse ecosystems within their territories is due precisely to their relationship with these ecosystems. They want to be recognized and supported in their role of nature stewards, rather than enforcers of state or global environmental community policies. Helping them gain land tenure, keep destructive outside forces at bay, and negotiate with the outside world on their own terms – all are necessary conditions if tropical American indigenous cultures and forests are to survive and thrive.

The Trio people have been living in their territories since Pre-Columbian times. The area they inhabit is an extremely remote and sparsely populated area, and adjoins or overlaps with recently created reserves such as the Tumucumaque National Park on the Brazil side of the border, and the Central Suriname Nature Reserve and the Sipaliwini Nature Reserve on the Suriname side of the border. During the past 40 years, their history and culture have suffered greatly as a result of religious conversion by western missionaries. And now mining and timber interests threaten the very land that they depend on for their survival.

Project objective

The goal of the project is to contribute to promote sustainable natural resources management to protect the ecosystems that occupy the high basin of the rivers Sipaliwini and Suriname, territory which corresponds closely with the traditional territories of the Trio indigenous communities, through proven bio-cultural conservation strategies. Its specific

objective is to assist the Trio/Wayana communities in developing a sustainable management strategy for their traditional territories, which will serve to establish the community as the rightful and capable steward of these resources.

The major thrust of this effort is to undertake capacity-building measures to co-develop a methodology (with the indigenous peoples and the host government) for indigenous people to manage their ancestral lands, which typically in the Amazon at least, are relatively pristine with low population density.

The Trio, similar to other Amazonian rainforest Indians, have an unparalleled knowledge of fish ecology, natural history, life cycles, etc., which has never been documented, much less harnessed for conservation and development purposes. The project seeks to work with these indigenous communities to design, develop, and implement training and management plans as part of the bio-cultural conservation and development project.

By empowering the indigenous communities based on traditional knowledge, and consolidating their legal aspirations over the territory, maintaining the high biodiversity value of the ecosystems these territories enclose is ensured, in addition to strengthening and enhancing the conservation function of neighboring protected areas⁴. By protecting their vibrant cultural heritage and actively engaging the Trio population in conservation efforts, the project will also work to protect their environment, which is of high global biodiversity value.

Consolidation of indigenous property rights, development of management plans for sustainable use of resources, and promotion of alternative sources of income will reduce the threat of mineral and timber extraction and non-sustainable hunting practices⁵.

In order to achieve the objective of the project, it is divided into four main components: (a) strengthened important cultural values, (b) enhanced collaboration between Trio/Wayana community and the Government of Suriname to successfully create and implement management strategy, (c) support the development of sustainable conservation-oriented incomes based in Non-Traditional Forest Products (NTFP), and (d) improved natural resources management.

Project linkage to GEF priorities and other relevant projects

The project is consistent with Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), ratified by Suriname, which aims at respecting, preserving and maintaining knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities. Its goal is associated with GEF OP#3 (forest ecosystems) as well as OP#12 (integrated ecosystem management) and additionally will generate global benefits associated with OP#2 (freshwater ecosystems). Also, Suriname is a signatory to the Amazon Cooperation Treaty, a legal instrument signed in 1978 for the purpose of fostering integrated and sustainable development of the Amazon River Basin, assigning particular importance to the exchange of information to promote better environmental protection.

Traditionally, the GEF promoted conservation of natural resources through the creation of protected areas. Projects evolved to emphasize the importance of traditional indigenous knowledge in the development of any management plans within protected areas⁶, but finally

⁴The project will also have an impact on protecting water quality as well as globally important ecological and watershed functions, through the protection of headwaters for everything from fish (the major source of edible protein in both countries) to protection of hydroelectric power (e.g., the project will help to protect the forests from which the Suriname River comes out; the Suriname River feeds the dam at Brokopondo that generates the electricity used by the bauxite industry which counts for 15% of the Surinamese GDP and 70% of exports earning in 2002).

⁵ . For example, large-scale mineral extraction can threaten biodiversity directly through land clearing, water, air and soil contaminants and natural habitat disruption. At a small scale, the use of mercury to extract gold can cause contamination of water impacting fish populations, water quality and (potential) ecotourism. The Trios are also well aware of the negative impacts of upstream mining.

⁶ Some examples include the following projects: "Strengthening of Indigenous People for the Preservation and Sustainable Use of the Colombian Amazon Ecosystem" (World Bank, PDF-B approved and full size project in pipeline), "Biodiversity Conservation

critics of the “protected area” approach as a means to promote conservation, have started to have an effect on GEF selecting criteria as can be seen by two GEF approved projects that promote to strengthen the capacity of indigenous communities to manage and protect biological resources based on traditional knowledge within their territories, rather than by creating protected areas. One project in Mexico (“Indigenous and Community Biodiversity Conservation, COINBIO”)⁷ implemented by the World Bank, and the other is a multi-country project in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama (“Indigenous Community Integrated Ecosystems Management”) implemented by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)⁸.

Following the steps of the two above-mentioned projects, this project proposes to strengthen traditional indigenous knowledge as the basis to the empowerment of indigenous communities as an alternative and complementary means to the establishment of protected areas in Suriname.

In this respect the proposed project is strongly linked and would complement the effort to strengthen stakeholder capacity to manage biodiversity of the GEF-supported project “Conservation of Globally Significant Forest Ecosystems in Suriname’s Guayana Shield” (under implementation by UNDP)⁹. Many of the activities included in the aforementioned project are directly relevant as a baseline to the proposed bio-cultural conservation and development project¹⁰ (e.g., national level strengthening of policy development functions, capacities and management controls relating to biodiversity conservation, activities financed by the Suriname Conservation Foundation -- e.g., capacity building for community-based conservation --, conservation awareness, and environmental education efforts that build national constituencies for biodiversity conservation).

The OAS counts with the cooperation of the IDB as implementing agency for the project, which, although new as a GEF implementing agency, has developed experience in this type of projects through its involvement in the Central American integrated ecosystem project mentioned before. In addition, the project will complement and gain from IDB’s work in Suriname, including the Suriname Land Management Program (SLMP), developed as part of a technical cooperation¹¹, as well as an IDB’s strategy paper under preparation to produce a blue print for natural resources management in Suriname¹².

and Integration of Traditional Knowledge on the Medicinal Plants in National Primary Health Care Policy in Central America and the Caribbean –Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama (UNEP, Medium Size Project under implementation), “Biodiversity Conservation in the Paramo and Motana Forest Ecosystems of the Colombian Massif (UNDP, under implementation), “Indigenous Management of protected Area in the Peruvian Amazon” (World Bank full size project under implementation).

⁷ The objective of this project is to achieve more effective biodiversity conservation in three states of Mexico (Oaxaca, Michoacan, and Guerrero) by strengthening the capacity of indigenous and ejido communities to manage and protect their biological and cultural resources based on traditional values and practices.

⁸ The objective of the proposed project is to support an emerging network of indigenous communities engaged in integrated ecosystem management (IEM) in the Central American region (Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama). This would enhance the sustainability of human-managed systems that have been evolving for centuries in Central America, conserving high levels of biodiversity, but that are under increasing threat.

⁹ The UNDP project recognizes that one of the main factors helping erode the potential contribution of protected areas to the advancement of conservation objectives is the absence of community participation in protected area management. Lack of participation alienates them from conservation efforts, causing them to seek conservation-incompatible means of livelihood. The UNDP project focuses on Protected areas, while this project proposes an “alternative means” to protect highly valuable global ecosystems (bio-cultural conservation and development approach) complementing the efforts of the UNDP project.

¹⁰ The fact that the UNDP project focuses on protected areas exclusively for implementation purposes, still allows the indigenous communities (outside protected areas) to learn from its outcomes. As a result, strengthening indigenous communities (outside protected areas) based on their traditional knowledge, would expand the scope of the UNDP project, assuring its replication and success. Similar synergy would be obtained from activities developed by The Foundation for Nature Conservation in Suriname (STINASU) that works for preserving Suriname’s nature by conducting research, providing nature education and organizing tourism activities in the nature reserves and Parks of Suriname.

¹¹ A land policy directive that was prepared as part of this technical cooperation which gives a brief description of the direction that government wants to go with regards to land, including land in the interior, was presented to the Council of Ministers in

Many other organizations have been carrying out several activities that will also complement the activities proposed in the project including:

- *Conservation International* activities with the Tareno communities including a geographic information systems project that documents and maps natural resource use by this community.
- *Conservation International* work on ecotourism.
- *The Amazon Conservation Team* (ACT)¹³ which has been working for over 20 years with the indigenous communities of the region as well as local government agencies and tribal councils in building local conservation capacity by strengthening local culture and by completing parallel conservation and management plans for both sides of the border.
- *Medical Mission*¹⁴ work providing free primary health care services to the approximately 50,000 people living in the interior of Suriname. Medical Mission is seeking to understand traditional medicine better by cooperating closely on a basis of trust and openness with traditional healers in the villages of Kwamalasamutu and Tëpu.

April 2004. However, as of yet there is no official confirmation of its approval. Until there is no answer from the government with regard to the land policy directive there can be no forward movement on the SLMP.

¹² The document is scheduled to be finalized by March 2005

¹³ The Amazon Conservation Team is a member of the executing team of the OAS project. ACT's experience has taught them that strong and thriving indigenous cultures, supported by national recognition of their claim to the lands they inhabit, is the key to biodiversity conservation in many areas where they work. In 2002, ACT received the United Nations Environment Program Global 500 Award in recognition of their conservation achievements.

¹⁴ The Medical Mission is a non-governmental organization and the product of cooperation between three religious groups and the Suriname Ministry of Health. The Medical Mission operates 45 health clinics distributed throughout the Interior and staffed by Community Health Assistants, trained health care providers who mostly originate from the communities they serve.