

Surama Village Eco-lodge, Guyana: Merging Traditional and Modern Approaches to Preserve Biodiversity and Create Sustainable Livelihoods

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Introduction

Surama Village Eco-lodge, www.suramaecolodge.com, is located at the edge of the vast North Rupununi wetlands, one of the world's greatest well-conserved, high-biodiversity hotspots. Here, where the Rupununi River joins the mighty Essequibo River and flows out to the Atlantic sea, the primary rainforest is still largely unspoiled.

A recently released book "Rupununi: Rediscovering a Lost World" recounts that in the 19th and early 20th centuries the Rupununi was as well known as the Galapagos, Serengeti and Ngorongoro are today. The Rupununi was visited and written about by well-known early explorers Sir Walter Raleigh and Charles Waterton, and later by naturalists Sir David Attenborough and Gerald Durrell and travel writer Evelyn Waugh.



Jaguar © FotoNatura.

The rainforest, rivers and seasonally flooded savannah of the Rupununi are home to an extraordinary mix of fauna and flora. Some of the world's largest species still thrive here – Jaguar, Giant Anteater, Giant River Otter, Giant River Turtle, Black Caiman, Tapir, Green Anaconda and Arapaima. The Rupununi is a bird watcher's paradise offering a diversity of Parrots, Cotingas, Toucans and Antbirds, and specialties like Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, Harpy Eagle, White-winged Potoo, Rufous-winged Ground-cuckoo and Crimson Fruitcrow.

Surama Village Eco-lodge provides an outstanding example of a community-based tourism enterprise that merges traditional knowledge and customs with modern learning and techniques to successfully conserve and enhance the biodiversity of the North Rupununi and to create sustainable livelihoods. This chapter highlights Surama's leadership and best practices in biodiversity protection and sustainable community tourism development.

About Surama

Surama is home to 300 Makushi indigenous people, called Amerindians in Guyana. The village is set in five-square miles of savannah, surrounded by the rainforest upon which Surama's residents depend for survival, and ringed by the foothills of the Pakarima Mountain range.

Surama started the eco-tourism enterprise in 2004 with a vision to “develop, own and manage a community-based eco-tourism business by constructively using the natural resources and our traditional culture in a socially appropriate manner.” The community-based enterprise borrowed one million GYD (approximately \$5,000 USD) to build the Eco-lodge. The loan was repaid early and the community's tourism economy has thrived since then. Surama now calls tourism the “Green Gold Rush,” and fully embraces sustainable tourism concepts and core values to create sustainable livelihoods and preserve Guyana's ecosystems and indigenous traditions.

After just seven years in operation the success of the eco-tourism enterprise has led to international recognition for Surama's leadership in sustainable community-owned tourism development:

- In 2011, Surama was named by National Geographic Traveler as amongst the best lodges in South America and as the most authentic and unique hotel in Guyana.

- Also in 2011, Surama Village Eco-lodge was chosen as the joint winner of the 2011 Caribbean Excellence in Sustainable Tourism Award. The award sponsors, the Caribbean

Tourism Organization (CTO) and TravelMole, selected Surama because the Eco-lodge harnesses the economic power of the visitor industry in a responsible and sustainable way to create wealth and to benefit the community and the environment surrounding it.

- In 2010, Sydney Allicock, the visionary Executive Director of the Eco-lodge, was chosen as the Public and Civic Contributions Laureate for the prestigious Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Awards for Excellence (ANSCAFE). He was selected for his leadership as a pioneer of community tourism in Guyana, implementing a sustainable tourism project that has been copied by other Amerindian communities and considered a model for indigenous tourism development.



Surama Benabs © Phil Palmer.

- In 2009, Surama took top honors as the Responsible Tourism Showcase Honoree for the U.S.-based Educational Travel Community, the highly respected 25-year-old membership organization for zoos, museums, alumni associations and other institutions dedicated to promoting lifelong learning through travel.

- Surama has received two Guyana tourism awards – the President’s Award for great community effort on community-based tourism, and the Tourism Pioneer Award from the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) for an outstanding contribution toward community-based tourism development.

Sustainable Land-use Planning and Management

Surama shares a boundary with the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Development and Conservation (ICC), a relationship that plays an important role in Surama’s approach to conservation and sustainable livelihoods development.

Iwokrama is a one-million acre rainforest preserve that the Government of Guyana “gifted” to the world after the Rio Summit in 1992 as a living laboratory for scientific research, eco-tourism and sustainable tropical forest management. Dubbed the “Greenheart of Guyana,” Iwokrama is home to a vast array of flora and fauna.

From the beginning, Surama was active in the development of Iwokrama. Community leader Fred Allicock led the site selection process and was the manager of Iwokrama for many years. His son, Sydney Allicock, has sat on the Board of Iwokrama for many years to represent the interests of the Makushi communities. Surama has played key roles in surveying and monitoring the one-million acre forest preserve, building the research station, working with international scientists and researchers and training the members of surrounding indigenous villages as rangers.

The leaders of Surama were impressed with the Iwokrama model, which led to Surama embracing sustainable tourism development and adopting a land-use plan that divides the community’s lands into wildlife areas and sustainable resource-use areas. Twenty square kilometers of community land have been set aside as protected, and a formal environmental inventory of the area was conducted in 2010 with the support of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The Eco-lodge is a catalyst for uniting the community to protect their natural resources and use them to generate sustainable livelihoods. The Eco-lodge conducts all of its programs in a sustainable manner, emphasizing environmental protection and minimal impact. Direct efforts are taken to foster conservation awareness and natural-resource management practices at the household level are made through environmental awareness outreach programs. Surama households make a conscious effort to reduce their exploitation of the forests for food, fuel and building materials.

Sustainable Community-based Tourism

The Surama Village Eco-lodge is built using local materials and traditional building techniques. The Eco-lodge has four traditional benab guest cabins, a lodge with four

guest rooms and a large dining and gathering benab. Surama also operates remote satellite jungle camps along the Burro Burro River. The Eco-lodge accommodates small groups only, reducing the impact of visitors in the wilderness areas and on every day community life.

Surama's authentic guides lead visitors on fascinating and interactive village experiences ranging from mountain treks, medicinal walks, rainforest hikes, bird-watching treks, community tours and dugout canoe excursions. The programs offered include a jungle survival course, delivered in partnership with Bushmaster Tours, where visitors learn how to survive in the jungle, from building fire and shelter to avoiding dangerous animals and finding and cooking food. The Eco-lodge also has an Amerindian spa featuring traditional herbal steam baths and massages using botanicals hand-made from ingredients of the rainforest.



Surama Children © Kevin Loughlin.

Surama's residents – especially the children – are highly involved in the eco-tourism enterprise. They lead visitors on nature and culture hikes, welcome them into their classrooms and give performances showcasing the Makuhi culture.

Tourism has become the single largest driver of economic activity in the

area. More than 70 people (one quarter of community members) are employed either directly as hospitality staff, tour guides, cooks, artisans and drivers, or indirectly as farmers, hunters, fishermen and construction and maintenance workers. More than 60 percent of the community's income is now generated through sustainable tourism, and 75 percent of Surama's households derive income from tourism.

Training and Skills for Sustainable Development

Surama has long prioritized training and development to support conservation and the development of sustainable livelihoods. Since 1998, together with other neighbouring Makushi communities, Surama has had a Junior Wildlife Club for children six to 18 years. The objectives are to develop awareness and understanding of the tropical rainforest environment and skills in natural-resource management and conservation. Throughout the years, through partnerships with international partners – such as Audubon, Rainforest Alliance and Iwokrama – club members have received training in bird and wildlife watching and field research and monitoring techniques, such as using mist nets to safely catch birds, using sound recording equipment, setting automatic camera traps, rain-fall monitoring and setting research transects.

On-going junior wildlife club activities include assisting with flora and fauna inventories and collections, wildlife-knowledge competitions and wildlife-related artwork. Cultural activities include learning-traditional skills, skits and cultural presentations. There is an annual Junior Wildlife Festival where club members compete in traditional skills such as basket weaving, cotton spinning and archery. Many of the club members have grown up to become environmental, political and community leaders.

Community members also take ranger, tour-guide and birding-guide training programs through Iwokrama and gain experience working as rangers, guides and scientific-research assistants there. Members involved in the Eco-lodge take numerous hospitality and tourism training programs offered by Iwokrama, the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA), the Guyana Tourism and Hospitality Association and other organizations.

To support the development of sustainable tourism in Guyana, Surama often helps with training of trainees from Iwokrama programs, Amerindian villages and non-Amerindian tourism enterprises.

Natural and Cultural Heritage Protection

Surama supports the protection of Guyana's notable biodiversity in many ways. As mentioned above, almost all the young people of Surama are active in the conservation effort and belong to the Junior Wildlife Club. In addition, many community members have participated in a range of training and international scientific research programs that work to save biological diversity.

Wildlife trapping has been banned and enforced since 1994. Harvesting of endangered tree species such as the bullet wood, letter wood, greenheart and waramaden are banned, while reforestation and monitoring programs have been introduced. Through the Makushi Research Unit (MRU), a biodiversity project was conducted involving the comprehensive study of traditional uses of local plants and animals and the ways in which these plants and animals interact.

When it comes to cultural heritage, Surama's philosophy is that eco-tourism exists to support the conservation of the Makushi culture. To begin with, Eco-lodge staff members work on a rotating basis so that they can continue to live the traditional community lifestyle.



Surama Cultural Group © John Canning.

Authentic traditional skills and knowledge are showcased in all of the wildlife, nature and cultural tourism experiences offered for visitors as outlined earlier. A women's cassava-making project supplies both an interesting tour and educates guests about agricultural traditions. A Women's Activity Center was created as a place where women come together for traditional craft making, sewing and embroidery, creating items to sell to visitors. A culture group was formed to help motivate and preserve the culture of the Makushi people especially among the young generation. The group comprises more than 20 people who perform dances, songs, poems and skits that delight tourists and enlighten them about the Makushi way of life. A Makushi Language Program is taught in school, which grew out of the Makushi Ethnobotany project.

Financial Sustainability

Apart from direct employment from eco-tourism, the community benefits from economic activity derived from products and services that support Surama's tourism micro-industry. Profits from the lodge have been used for refurbishing the lodge (using furniture built by Surama youth wood-working initiative), establishing base camps, buying vehicles to transport guests and supplies, installing a satellite internet service and installing solar power.

Visitor fees are combined with employee contributions to subsidize a local investment fund that contributes to community health and education infrastructure and programs, school supplies, maintenance of community facilities, solar power, construction of a windmill, university scholarships for Surama teens and the purchase of a truck for importing goods and to exporting cash crops and other goods to the market.

The fund subsidizes a Community Credit Scheme, which provides micro-loans to local entrepreneurs. This fund addresses poverty reduction and is central to the community's general philosophy of self-sufficiency.

Eco-tourism income in Surama reduces risks associated with traditional subsistence agriculture. Further, the Eco-lodge's success in creating employment opportunities has significantly reduced incentives for men to leave the village for long periods to mine or cut timber elsewhere.

Leadership and Partnerships

In order to support environmental, cultural and social sustainability, Surama has taken on many leadership roles and undertaken a range of partnerships. For example, Surama community leaders have played a leading role in the establishment of the Bina Hill Institute, established in 2001 to develop training, research and other resources in the North Rupununi. Its programs focus on natural-resource management, traditional-knowledge systems and building capacity for both occupational and economic development. BHI also is the coordinating center for the marketing and sales of the local tourism role model for Amerindian communities in Guyana, inspiring and mentoring at least six other communities to start sustainable tourism enterprises.

Surama has played a leading role in the establishment of the Makushi Research Unit, a Rupununi region women's group that has collected a wealth of information on Amerindian lifestyles and ethno-botanical knowledge and published a number of books and educational resources based on local knowledge.

Surama is part of a regional consortium (the Community and Tourism Services, or CATS) that operates the Iwokrama Canopy Walkway and Atta Rainforest Lodge. A partnership between Surama and Eerepami Regenwaldstiftung, a German organization, supports remote-area development, biodiversity conservation and the exchange of science, culture and education between Germany and Guyana. Surama also participates in international cultural exchanges, including two exchanges with indigenous groups from Canada.

Conclusion

Surama Village Eco-lodge is demonstrating that investing in conservation, indigenous tourism, research, education and local development provides a variety of positive payoffs. The case study illustrates the importance of strategic alliances and collaborative agreements between conservation organizations, indigenous communities and the tourism sector. The benefits include community development, biodiversity protection and enhancement, enriched and higher value tourism experiences, sustainable livelihoods and long-term sustainable development.