

# Iwokrama's plan for SFM

**A sustainable forest management model has been devised in Guyana. Now it needs to be implemented**

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**I**N 1989 the Government of Guyana designated 370 000 hectares of near-pristine rainforest in the southern part of the country as the Iwokrama Forest. This area is characterised by poor quartzite sandy soils of the ancient Guyana granite shield. Undulating hills are interspersed by rocky outcrops and mountains, transected by several major and partly navigable rivers. The northern part of the forest is uninhabited, save for one indigenous village, but to the south a dozen or more indigenous communities comprise some 3500 inhabitants.

In this area, the Government of Guyana initiated a very ambitious plan to combine research and practical forest management with the aim of showcasing both conservation and sustainable forest management (SFM) for timber production. A field station was constructed in 1994, and in 1996 the government passed the Iwokrama Act, which set out the legal parameters of the forest and the activities to be undertaken therein. It also established the Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development, a non-profit organisation charged with managing the Iwokrama Forest. Another very important aspect of the Iwokrama Act was that the indigenous communities inside and around the forest retained their traditional user rights, including to wildlife and even the small-scale mining of gold.

Right from the start the initiative attracted international donors. ITTO became an important one of these with the acceptance and financing of ITTO PROJECT PD 10/97 REV.1 (F) in 1997. The development objective of this project was to optimise the sustainable supply of economic and environmental goods and services from Guyana's forests; the specific objective was to develop a demonstration model of sustainable, commercial-scale forest management to deliver multiple products.

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The forest was zoned (see *TFU 11/4*) into two major categories of roughly equal size: wilderness (in three separate areas), and sustainable use (one area). The ITTO project was to concentrate on the 180 000 hectares zoned for sustainable use, with six planned outputs: a forest management plan; a feasibility study for both timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs); commercial arrangements for utilisation; increased availability of timber and NTFPs; the training of local men and women in SFM for multiple products; and improved guidelines for SFM.



**River views:** the Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development. Photo: © Fotonatura

The project ended in April 2004 and an ex-post evaluation was carried out by the author in April 2005; it revealed that the project had reached many of its planned outputs, and even surpassed expectations in some of them.

## **Effects on indigenous communities**

Probably the most remarkable achievement of Iwokrama, through the ITTO project and others, has been its impact on local indigenous communities. Initially, these communities viewed the Iwokrama initiative with a certain measure of suspicion, which had its roots in earlier indigenous land claims to the forest. However, the nature of the Iwokrama Act, which respects indigenous user rights, the broad consultative process used to develop joint activities, and the participatory training provided by Iwokrama, have all contributed to the building of a very harmonious relationship between the communities and the Iwokrama initiative. Testimonies to this relationship were given again and again by indigenous representatives during the ex-post evaluation.

## Local organisation

One of the most interesting and positive outcomes of the relationship-building was that the indigenous communities organised themselves into a joint body—the Northern Rupununi District Development Council (NRDDB)—to speak with one voice on matters concerning Iwokrama. In cooperation with Iwokrama, the NRDDB itself has launched a series of training activities on a wide range of topics, including improved agricultural practices, fisheries' conservation and management, the production of a range of NTFPs, teacher-training in vernacular languages, and research activities in both native languages and culture; it now even runs a local radio station and publishes a newsletter. In fact, the coming of Iwokrama has raised the organisation of the indigenous peoples in the region to an entirely new level.

## Management planning

In many other fields, the achievements have been significant. Forest inventories were carried out in several stages, partly based on data and assumptions from other parts of Guyana. During the extension of the project, a new, state-of-the-art inventory of the entire sustainable-use area was carried out, and a final management plan and feasibility study for the production of NTFPs and timber was developed.

This management plan represents a departure from the selective logging practised elsewhere in Guyana to date, particularly because it identifies a range of new commercial species. Partly due to this it also specifies a reasonably high annual allowable cut, which has been shown to be well below sustained-yield capacity but should be high enough to ensure the economic sustainability of the operation.

Other forest research carried out as part of the Iwokrama initiative, mainly financed by other donors, has almost been overdone. The Iwokrama bibliography of publications covers some 150 titles, some into topics—such as hieroglyphs, herpetology and arachnology—that seem rather esoteric for practical forest management. Indeed, for snake- and spider-lovers, Iwokrama has a lot to offer!

## Time to implement

The supporting materials for SFM are certainly impressive, but after nearly ten years of development it would seem high time for the concepts to be put into practice. Implementing the management plan is essential for making the Centre economically sustainable through the produc-

tion of timber and NTFPs and also for generating benefits for the indigenous communities. The ex-post evaluation revealed that the preconditions for logging and commercial operations are in place. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the ITTO project and of the Iwokrama initiative generally, then, is that logging has not actually started yet. Iwokrama Timber Inc has been created to deal with prospective logging companies and also to work with the indigenous communities to agree on the split of proceeds from harvesting, but this work is still nascent. It would seem that further impetus is needed to get full-scale commercial activities under way; this will be provided by a follow-up project, ITTO PROJECT PD 297/04 (F), should it be approved and financed by the International Tropical Timber Council.

There is little doubt that all the preparatory work, and particularly the development of the management plan, is a major achievement for the ITTO project, and something that in the view of this author will have a lasting effect on forest practices and policy, not only in Guyana but also elsewhere in South America and possibly beyond. But the proof of the pudding lies in the eating. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the next phase of the project gets under way as soon as possible, and the management plan is put into practice.



**Suspended animation:** the author poses on a canopy walkway in the Iwokrama Forest.



**Living space:** an Amerindian hut in the Iwokrama Forest.

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