



'The forest is our life': Hope for change in Guyana's forests

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Mark George and his wife Norma George heading for their home from their farm. Photo by Gaublert Sutherland.

First, an American company came knocking. Then an Indian firm. A Chinese corporation soon followed.

"Ten years doing logging? The amount of machines they wanted to bring... I said no, don't interfere with our jungle, that is our jungle, leave it there," recalled Mark George of one encounter with a company that was seeking approval to log the forests surrounding Annai, an indigenous village in Guyana more than 400 kilometers (about 250 miles) from the capital, Georgetown.

"The people supported me," said George, who was then the toshao or village chief. Promises of \$5,000 per year for the village and salaries for the village council were made, an appealing offer in an area where poverty is rife and jobs are scarce. But, conscious of how much the forests contributed to their livelihoods, the people resisted, George said.

That resistance has come to the fore time and again over the past decade as companies sought to operate in the vast forests that surround Annai and its sister communities, with the indigenous villages often the last to know as various companies were granted concessions for logging.

Forestry is big business in Guyana. Forests cover approximately 87 percent of the country's land or about 18.48 million hectares (roughly 45.7 million acres), much of it designated as State Forests managed by the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC). The sector contributed [2.27 percent](#) to Guyana's GDP in 2016, with total forest products exports valued

at \$41.9 million. Approximately 20,000 people, mainly in the rural and hinterland areas, are employed in the sector.

Nonetheless, Guyana has one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world. In 2017, forest loss was recorded at [0.048 percent](#), the lowest since 2010, when the country began monitoring such changes under a REDD+ pact with Norway. Over the years, gold mining has been the main driver of deforestation, accounting for [74 percent](#) of the deforestation recorded in 2017.

Forced from their land

For indigenous communities, the destruction wrought by mining has been alarming, as has the granting of forest concessions close to indigenous lands. Guyana's laws provide for indigenous villages to obtain titles for the land they occupy and, currently, indigenous peoples own [14 percent](#) of the country's land. However, the process of granting legal ownership has been cumbersome and villages have complained of mining and forest concessions being granted on land they have customarily used for farming, hunting, and other activities, all without them being informed. With farms as well as hunting and fishing grounds being impacted — and sometimes destroyed — in some cases, people have been forced from the land, as it does not fall within the titled area.

Forests continue to sustain the lives of Guyana's Indigenous Peoples — as they have for generations. Indigenous Peoples account for 10 percent of the population and in the rural areas, where most live, poverty rates range from 61 percent to 94 percent, [according to UNICEF](#). Jobs are scarce, and according to the UNICEF report, “for most of the Indigenous Peoples, poverty is not only lack of monetary resources, but it involves access to land, culture, medicine, food, education and safety.”

Forests as a way of life

Annai is perched at the edges of the Rupununi savannah, where forest-covered mountains, the peaks often adorned in fleeting wisps of clouds, mark the beginning of the jungle. Like other indigenous communities, the people here turn to the forest for the necessities of life.

Forests are essentially their “supermarket,” according to Mike Williams, the secretary for the village council and member of the board of the North Rupununi District Development Board, made up of 20 indigenous villages that collectively work on development issues, including those related to the forest.

“Each one of these villages depend on the forest for many things, for food, wildlife, fish, shelter, medicine, agriculture,” he said. Palm fronds form the roofs of many houses.

At her home in Annai, while preparing to extract the toxins from cassava to make cassava bread, a staple of Indigenous Peoples' diets, Zalita Moses points out that the matapee (a type of strainer used to squeeze out the “cassava water”), the sifter, and other implements used in the process all come from the forest, while the cassava is cultivated in jungle clearings because that is where the most fertile land is located.



Abel Williams weaves a fan while his grandson Dylan Williams displays some of the products his grandfather produces using materials from the forest. Photo by Gaulbert Sutherland.

“I feel more comfortable in the forest than at home in the village,” said Mark George, as he paused from clearing his farm of weeds. His and the surrounding farms are located on state land, which brings him some unease as a nearby non-indigenous community claims it, but they have agreed that the indigenous farmers can use the land. “This is our farming ground from very long [ago], our grandparents were here,” he said, disclosing that his sons and other relatives all farm in the area. Farming is their rotational livelihood and main source of income as they sell the excess produce.

“The forest is important because that is how we live, we protect it, we conserve it, and we also collect food from the forest... collect materials for the house, for the craft, medicines,” said Veronica Farias, who, for the past 12 years, has led a group of women who produce various remedies for ailments.

The group, called Medicine From Trees, utilizes plant materials, including crabwood seeds, harvested from the crabwood trees located deep in the forest where logging companies have previously expressed interest. Crabwood is a commercially valuable timber species but is not abundant in Guyana, and Farias is concerned at the implications should logging companies succeed in gaining access to the area.

“If they touch that area where we depend on, and the crabwood trees, we would lose everything,” she said. “They will just extract the materials and where will we make ends meet for this project or for us?”

Creating Space for Indigenous People

On November 23, 2018, Guyana initialed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union under the EU's Forestry Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) program.

The FLEGT program aims to reduce illegal logging by strengthening sustainable and legal forest management, improving governance, and promoting trade in legally produced timber. The initialing of the VPA followed six years of negotiations that saw the involvement of multiple stakeholders in Guyana.

For Williams, who was involved in the process, the pact represents a new hope that the concerns of Indigenous Peoples will be treated with more seriousness. "The laws are there but it's never really adhered to. But if we have to make the VPA work, all these things have to be abided with," said Williams. He pointed out that if concessions are being allocated next to indigenous titled lands, the law says that the villages have to be informed, but this is not usually done. He said that changes have already been seen with extensive consultations and feedback and training.

"I think they have done a good job. They've been the only entity that have been interacting and meeting the people," he said of the GFC and the VPA negotiation process. "I think our concerns will be listened to more because of this process."

Laura George, of the Amerindian Peoples Association, an NGO that advocates for indigenous peoples' rights, said that the process created spaces for their concerns to be heard. "To an extent, we can say that the VPA that was initialed... created a platform from which we can work to enhance forest governance and respecting rights, improving the system and reducing illegality," she said. George added that as the process moves forward, they hope that resources can be made available to ensure the continued engagement and protection of indigenous peoples' rights.

In this way, observes Oda Almas of the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), the VPA could be a catalyst not just for enforcing existing laws, but for bringing Guyana's national legislation into line with its international obligations on indigenous peoples' rights.

[Research conducted](#) by indigenous communities themselves, with assistance from APA, FPP, and the Rainforest Foundation US, has documented how village titles granted by the state overwhelmingly leave out large areas of the communities' customary lands. In many cases logging concessions have been allocated in these areas — because the national legislation allows this.

"The VPA could be very useful if it helps create a platform which leads to indigenous peoples' rights to their customary lands being recognized and protected both in law and in practice, so that concessions and logging operations could not be carried out there on such lands without the free, prior and informed consent of the customary owners," says Almas.

The VPA process has propelled changes that otherwise would have taken longer.

Kenny David, who heads Guyana's FLEGT Secretariat, pointed out that Guyana's overarching Forest Act was revised and codes of practice that govern forest operations were published. Laura Singh of Guyana's Forest Products Development and Marketing Council observed that some requirements for those involved in the industry were not enforced previously but said that, influenced by the VPA process, this is now being done "because people need to ensure that they are legal in every sense, [including] the environmental, social and the economic component of it."

Attitudes among stakeholders have also changed. "Many times, when we went, people said, 'Listen, this EU thing is not for us, we don't wanna hear about it, we'll sell our wood to whomever.' But then you understand that if you don't get it right... at the very start of that process, it's gonna affect [the entire sector]," said David. Greater understanding, he said, has fostered an increased willingness to comply with regulations.

In Guyana, illegal logging is not a major problem; improving governance and access to markets is seen as a bigger issue among stakeholders.

"We said [that with] the VPA, for us, the motivation wasn't to curb illegal logging because illegal logging was always quite small, but it was rather to improve our systems and give us access to markets which were the things we lacked," said David.

For stakeholders, the changes seen and promised have engendered hope of positive change for governance, markets, and rights.

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