

Wai Wai choose conservation economy for traditional Amazon territory

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Three years after gaining formal title to their traditional territory in the northern Amazon, the Wai Wai people of Guyana have achieved another milestone when the region was declared the nation's first Community Owned Conservation Area.

Under regulations passed by the Guyana parliament, the Wai Wai community formally designated their land a protected area and adopted a management plan, developed with the support of Conservation International (CI), for the 625,000-hectare (1.54-million-acre) tract on the northern border of Brazil's Pará state.

As managers of a Community Owned Conservation Area (COCA), the 204 Wai Wai of Konashen District are building a "conservation economy" based on the sustainable use of their natural resources. The plan will create jobs from conservation activities, such as newly trained parabiologists working with researchers to assess the territory's flora and fauna, and local rangers patrolling the area. Other economic activities include ecotourism and expanding the traditional Wai Wai craft business.

Declaration of the COCA fulfilled the vision of Elka, who became the first Kayaritomo or chief of the Wai Wai in 1969, of Wai Wai ownership and sustainable management of their lands.

"We have always been keepers of the forests that support us, and now it is official, recognized by the government and the world," said Cemci Sose, the current Kayaritomo of the Wai Wai. "The immediate challenge we face is creating economic opportunity through the Community Owned Conservation Area to prevent our young people from leaving, which could destroy our community."

The Wai Wai received formal title to their land in 2004, and immediately asked for CI's help in creating the necessary management plan and

regulations to become a COCA. Over the next three years, the Wai Wai leadership worked with CI, Guyana's Environmental Protection Agency and the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs to develop a management plan and structure that will bring economic benefit to the Wai Wai while protecting part of the largest remaining swathes of pristine rainforest on Earth.

"The Wai Wai have confirmed what the Government of Guyana has always espoused; that is, settling Amerindian land claims is one way of protecting the environment for future generations," said Hon. Minister of Amerindian Affairs Carolyn Rodrigues. "Who is better placed to protect the environment than those who have been doing it for time immemorial."

By making their homeland a Community Owned Conservation Area, the Wai Wai will join and benefit from Guyana's National Protected Areas System and an endowment trust being established by the government of Guyana. CI's Global Conservation Fund and the German government are major contributors to the endowment fund.

The Wai Wai homeland is part of the Guayana Shield, a huge stretch of Amazon rainforest across six South American countries. The region provides habitat to jaguar, blue poison frog, cock of the rock, scarlet macaw and other Amazon wildlife.

CI is promoting the value of the Wai Wai tropical forest for carbon sequestration, clean watersheds and other ecosystem services it provides. Cutting and burning tropical forests contributes 20 percent of the total greenhouse gas emissions blamed for global warming, and the world's burgeoning carbon market means developing countries such as Guyana could benefit from the market value of standing rainforests that absorb atmospheric carbon. In addition, the Wai Wai homeland is the headwaters of Guyana's largest river, the Essequibo, effectively making the Wai Wai

protectors of the nation's largest source of fresh water.

"This shows the power of giving land rights to indigenous populations, because they know what's best for their communities," CI President Russell A. Mittermeier said. "The Wai Wai could have sold off the timber and other natural assets for a one-time payoff, but instead they chose to protect the rainforest and allow future generations to continue to benefit from it."

Source: Conservation International

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