



THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN CONSERVATION

There are many things to boast about when we think about our homeland – Guyana. It is reported that as much as 87% of our land remains intact forest. Added to being the ‘Land of Many Waters’, it is not surprising to hear of the amazing diversity and abundance of wildlife that can be found in our rainforests, mangroves, savannas and freshwater habitats. No doubt you have heard about or visited one of our five (5) Protected Areas – the Kaieteur National Park, the Iwokrama Rainforest Reserve, the Shell Beach Protected Area, the Kanuku Mountains Protected Areas or the Kanashen Community owned Conservation Area? These areas have been recognized for being biodiversity hotspots and were deemed deserving of protection and management under the Guyana Protected Areas System.

When we think of conservation in Guyana – true, we think of our wildlife, protected areas, and even local agencies such as the Protected Areas Commission, the Wildlife Conservation and Management Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency. However, there have always been champions for environmental conservation and protection. Over the past few decades there have been increased efforts to recognize these champions; our Indigenous brothers and sisters who have been the custodians of the lands they occupy. Their way of life has always given them a close relationship with the land and waterways around them. The rainforests and rivers provide for their sustenance and livelihoods. Most importantly, their cultural beliefs and practices, based on traditional knowledge, have ensured sustainable use of these resources. Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, practices and innovations of Indigenous people, which were acquired over many years, being passed down from generation to generation. It is not static, but responds to the environment and evolves over time. It may take the form of practices, stories, songs, cultural values, beliefs/rituals, languages and community law.

The recognition of Indigenous peoples and the role that their traditional knowledge has had in managing and protecting the environment worldwide has been increasing emphasized. Amazingly, most Indigenous communities are situated in areas where the vast majority of the world’s biodiversity are found. They have been managing the resources in these areas in a sustainable way for thousands of years. Some of their practices have been proven to enhance and promote biodiversity at the local level and aid in maintaining healthy ecosystems. The United Nations Convention on Biological

Diversity (UNCBD) has therefore been encouraging increased dialogues and involvement of Indigenous people in conservation planning and actions.

In that light, Guyana has been working at various levels to ensure that we recognize the role our Indigenous peoples have played and continue to play in the management and conservation of Guyana's natural resources. For example, each of our Protected Areas is associated with several Indigenous communities. These communities are engaged in supporting the process of managing these Protected Areas and their rights to continued sustainable use of the resources within these areas are respected. At the same time, it is acknowledged by many Indigenous communities that some of their traditional knowledge is at risk of being lost. Efforts to safeguard traditional knowledge therefore need to be urgently addressed.

So what can be done? Look out next week for a follow-up article to learn about a Darwin Initiative (UK-funded) project that has been promoting the inclusion of traditional knowledge at the national level.

You can share your ideas and questions by sending letters to: “Our Earth, Our Environment”, C/O ECEA Programme, Environmental Protection Agency, Ganges Street, Sophia, GEORGETOWN, or email us at: eit.epaguyana@gmail.com. Follow us on Facebook and Instagram and subscribe to our YouTube channel.