



Wa Wiizi
Our territory



Wa Kaduzu
Our custom



**Customary Use of Biological Resources
and Related Traditional Practices within
Wapichan Territory in Guyana**



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Wa Wiizi – Wa Kaduzu

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**Customary Use of Biological Resources and Related Traditional Practices
within Wapichan Territory in Guyana**

An indigenous case study

[Abridged Version 1.3]

April 2006

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Cover photographs (from top):

- View of part of Wapichan territory from Diniwud rock, looking northeast towards Raada Mountain
- Shooting fish with bow and arrow, Kat'ur Creek
- Weaving containers with ité palm fronds
- Weaving a Wapichan hammock
- Crops from a Wapichan farm
- Extracting medicinal roots

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Executive summary

Sustainable use provisions under article 10(c) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) require States Parties to ...” protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation and sustainable use requirements.” Through the adoption of the CBD’s Principles and Guidelines for the Sustainable Use of Biodiversity, government signatories to the Convention have agreed that sustainable use of biodiversity is enhanced by supportive policies, laws and institutions at all levels of governance (Principle 1), and that indigenous and local communities should be empowered to manage biological resources and their “rights” over and/or “stewardship” of biological resources should be recognised and reinforced (Principle 2).

This study summarises how the Wapichan people in Guyana (South America) customarily use biological resources within their traditional territory in the South Rupununi, and explores the opportunities and challenges relating to effective implementation of article 10(c) of the CBD at the local and national level. The study is based on 4 month’s fieldwork undertaken by a team of eight Wapichan researchers in 16 villages and numerous smaller settlements in the South Rupununi District. The results of the study and its recommendations were validated by the leaders and elders of all participating communities in November 2005.

It is highlighted that the Wapichan people have occupied and used land and biological resources in the South Rupununi since time immemorial. Wapichan communities feel a strong attachment to this extensive area, which constitutes their ancestral *wiizi* “territory.” A large seasonally flooded grassland-shrub ecosystem in the western and central parts of the territory and an extensive tropical forest ecosystem in the south and east, together support a rich mosaic of habitats and a high biodiversity. The whole area is drained by major and minor rivers associated with permanent and seasonal wetlands that support a large variety of fish and other aquatic life, including the endangered giant otter and arapaima fish, among others.

Indigenous authors point out that present day use of resources can be partly viewed as adaptation of custom in response to economic, cultural and institutional change introduced since colonial times. A significant number of families, for example, have integrated small-scale cattle rearing on the savannah into their livelihood, while maintaining their traditional farms cut in forest and savannah woodland. Central villages have become larger and more permanent since the introduction of schools and churches, but Wapichan communities have adapted their settlement pattern in order to maintain their traditional practice of shifting cultivation.

Documentation of the use of biological resources shows that Wapichan communities in Guyana customarily use the land for farming and use a wide variety of uncultivated plants and wild animals for food, craft, construction, medicines and cultural activities. Customary use takes place across the whole range of ecosystems and habitats found in the South Rupununi: savannah, forest, mountains, swamps, lakes, rivers etc. Settlement is dispersed, with families occupying at least three separate dwellings: one in the main village, one on the family farming grounds and another in distant hunting and fishing grounds. Family farmlands lie between 1 and 25 miles from settlements, while shared community hunting, fishing and gathering grounds are located between three and 35 miles from people’s homes. The customary land use system is thus an extensive one.

The study finds that the Wapichan *kaduzu* “custom” includes a rich body of norms and beliefs that promote the “sensible” use of land and natural resources. Customary law contains rules against over-harvesting and strongly condemns wasteful activities, while traditional practices promote selective and rotational resource use to enable re-growth and regeneration. Respectful and measured resource use is underpinned by a shared sense of responsibility regarding the need to care for resources for future generations and a strong belief that all life forms have their own spirit grandfather or “keeper” that must be respected by humans.

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According to custom, land and resources are held and shared collectively among Wapichan families and communities, while their traditional territory is considered to be owned by, and be the collective responsibility of, the Wapichan people in Guyana as a whole.

Access to land and biological resources is regulated under the traditional system of land tenure, governance and decision-making, which upholds the need to share within and between communities, but limits the access of outsiders. The study shows how introduced community institutions like Village Councils are integrated with the traditional system of collective land holding, and have begun to codify customary laws and traditional practices and are developing rules to address emerging resource issues stemming from the use of introduced technologies and non-traditional activities e.g., sand extraction.

Communities have also created their own inter-community bodies known as District Toshaos Councils, which have been set up to reinforce their traditional jurisdiction over shared farming, hunting, fishing, gathering grounds, coordinate internal collective decisions and enable joint dialogues with the government over land tenure, development, resource use and conservation issues. These inter-community councils are working to support the long-standing struggle of the Wapichan people to obtain legal title over the full extent of their ancestral lands in the South Rupununi. Initiatives include community mapping of traditional occupation and use and a collective agreement to develop a territorial management plan based on customary use and the communities' own proposals for promotion of traditional practices, self-development, sustainable use and community conservation. While there are two District Councils within Wapichan territory, their objective is to obtain title to their traditionally owned lands, territory and resources that will be vested in a body on behalf of the Wapichan people rather than in individual villages, as it is presently.

The 1980 Constitution of Guyana, as amended in 2003, recognizes indigenous peoples' right to the promulgation, preservation and protection of their way of life and cultural heritage. While this provision has yet to be judicially interpreted, a legal and policy analysis completed as part of the study finds that natural resource, land and other relevant legislation does not adequately give effect to this right and is otherwise deficient with respect to other rights and issues that provide the framework within which customary use of biological resources can be effectively protected. Guyana ratified the CBD in 1994. However, its National Biodiversity Action Plan contains no explicit policy on article 10(c) and tends to see indigenous peoples' resource use primarily as a threat to biodiversity. The analysis finds that existing national laws and policies do not adequately recognise the vital linkages between traditional tenure, customary resource use and the maintenance of associated traditional practices. For example, land demarcation and titling procedures in Guyana do not recognise and protect the customary land tenure regime and the new Draft Amerindian Bill, if adopted as it stands, would deny the right of several indigenous communities to hold land collectively and may render some communities ineligible to acquire title.

The study concludes that sustainability of the traditional resource use in the South Rupununi stems from maintenance of the customary land tenure regime, which enables access to extensive areas of land and diverse resource areas, continuity in a dispersed settlement pattern, the extensive traditional system of shifting cultivation; and Wapichan *kaduzu* "custom", which is widely shared throughout all communities and features explicit norms that promote respectful use of natural resources. This sustainable use system is threatened by inadequate land titles that do not recognise the extensive pattern of customary occupation and use; incursions by commercial hunters and informal miners from the coastal areas of Guyana and from Brazil and a risk of colonisation and land invasion linked to international road and infrastructure projects.

In order to address these threats to long-term sustainable resource use and enable effective implementation of article 10(c) it is recommended that land and natural resource laws and policies should be updated to make them consistent with the new Constitution of Guyana and afford effective recognition and protection of traditional tenure, governance and resource use regime of the Wapichan people and other indigenous peoples in Guyana. A call is also made to relevant government bodies and international agencies to support Wapichan efforts to develop and implement a management plan for their territory in the South Rupununi.

Preface

Initial work under the CBD has concluded that in order to implement article 10(c), signatory States should ensure national laws and policies secure indigenous peoples customary laws, systems of governance and rights over lands and resources. This document summarises the results of a participatory review of the customary use of biological resources and associated traditional practices of the Wapichan people in Guyana. The case study includes legal and policy analyses that assess progress and challenges in implementing article 10(c) in the South Rupununi District in particular, and in Guyana in general. The indigenous communities who took part in this study present several recommendations at the end of the report that identify the steps we consider necessary to afford greater protection of our customary use of biodiversity in the savannahs, forests and mountains in the South-Central and South Rupununi.

The Wapichan people in Guyana have organised themselves to assert their rights and protect biological resources in their traditional territory through: making their own maps of their customary land use systems; establishing their own District Toshias Councils; and applying for recognition of their territory based on past land claims and their continuing traditional occupation and use of their lands. Our Village Councils and our South Central District and South District Toshias Councils initiated and supported this 10(c) project as part of this ongoing effort to seek respect for our customary land rights and effective protection for all the cultural and biological diversity in our homeland.

The considerable time and effort expended by our young research team to compile this study forms part of this negotiation for proper recognition of the full extent of our territorial rights. It is expected that this valuable study will in time contribute to the drawing up of land management plans by Wapichan communities for lands that are traditionally occupied and resources that are used across our whole territory (titled and untitled lands). As the government increases its presence in our territory and promotes new land use and conservation policies in our area, we also hope this work will inform our dialogue with government in the coming months and years.

It is important to note that the summary document presented here contains only a fraction of the rich information documented by our 10(c) research team: their final report is more than double the length of this abridged version. We hope that in due course a fuller and more detailed version of the findings of this community-based research can be published as a book. In addition to this summary and the detailed report, the project has generated extensive field notes, recordings and photographs gathered as part of the study, which will be treasured and carefully stored by our communities for future generations.

Finally, on behalf of the communities of the South Rupununi, I wish to thank all the research team for their hard work. We believe their work is a vital contribution to our collective effort to secure the traditional lands and protect the traditional practices of the Wapichan people in Guyana.

Patrick Gomes
Toshao, Morora Naawa

March 2006

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Leaders and elders of the South and South Central District Tshaos Councils meet in January 2005 to plan the 10(c) project



**Research team during initial training, January 2005
(transcribing legends)**



**Six [of the eight] authors of this 10(c) report,
together with the two field coordinators (Potarinao village, 11/05)**

1 The CBD and article 10(c): context for the study

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is an intergovernmental global agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. The Convention frames the way in which States that are Parties to the treaty will achieve biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of biological resources. The CBD forms part of international law and countries that join the convention have a legal obligation to implement its provisions.

Article 10(c)

One particular provision of the Convention that is of special interest and relevance to indigenous peoples is article 10(c), which obliges governments to:

“... protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation and sustainable use requirements”

The Secretariat of the CBD emphasises that the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities “directly derives” from their customary use of biological resources, and therefore “... article 10(c) should be read in conjunction with article 8(j)”¹, which requires Parties to respect, preserve and maintain traditional knowledge.²

Initial work by the Secretariat on article 10(c) has recommended that in order to comply with obligations under this article States must ensure that national legislation and national policies account for and recognise, among others, indigenous legal systems, corresponding to systems of governance and administration, land and water rights and control over sacred and cultural sites (Section 6).³

Addis Ababa Principles and Guidelines for the Sustainable Use of Biodiversity

Through the adoption of the CBD’s official guidelines on the sustainable use of biological diversity, government signatories to the Convention have agreed that sustainable use of biodiversity is enhanced by supportive policies, laws and institutions at all levels of governance (Principle 1), and that indigenous and local communities should be empowered to manage biological resources and their “rights” over and/or “stewardship” of biological resources should be recognised and reinforced (Principle 2).⁴

Guyana and the CBD

Guyana ratified the CBD in 1994. It has since developed and adopted a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan – NBSAP (1999). This national policy does not directly address article 10(c) (Section 6). However, it does note the need for more research on “traditional methods” of sustainable use of biological resources and the need to formulate appropriate indicators for the sustainability of resource use in collaboration with resource users themselves.⁵ Surprisingly, however, the NBSAP does not recognise the contribution of the indigenous peoples of Guyana to the sustainable use and conservation of biological resources. Instead, the existing national policy tends to see indigenous peoples’ resource use primarily as a potential threat to biodiversity and the environment (see Section 6).

¹ <http://www.biodiv.org/programmes/socio-eco/traditional/linkages.asp> On the interconnections between Article 8(j) and 10(c), see also <http://www.biodiv.org/programmes/socio-eco/traditional/what.asp>

² Secretariat of the CBD (2005) *Handbook of the Convention of Biological Diversity Including its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, 3rd Edition, Montreal* at 138-151

³ Secretariat of the CBD (1997) *Traditional Knowledge and Biological Diversity*. UNEP/CBD/TKBD/1/2) at 11 and 12 <http://www.biodiv.org/doc/meetings/tk/wstkbd-01/official/wstkbd-01-02-en.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.biodiv.org/doc/publications/addis-gdl-en.pdf>

⁵ Environmental Protection Agency (1999) *Guyana: National Biodiversity Action Plan – a programme for action by stakeholders towards the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity* EPA and GEF-UNDP, Georgetown <http://www.epaguyana.org/downloads/National-Biodiversity-Action-Plan.pdf>

Purpose of the study

It is hoped that the study will inform dialogue between the Wapichan people and the government of Guyana about ways to promote the more effective implementation of article 10(c) of the CBD in the Rupununi and beyond. As noted in the preface, the findings of this community-based study will also feed into efforts by our communities to develop a management plan for our ancestral territory (Section 7). It is likewise intended that this study be used by other indigenous peoples in Guyana and beyond, as well as Parties to the CBD, the Convention Secretariat and relevant international organizations as one substantive example of the challenges and opportunities that exist in relation to the national implementation of article 10(c). In this way, the study aims to answer calls made by the Secretariat and Parties for information on the experience and initiatives of indigenous peoples on the sustainable use of biological diversity and efforts to implement article 10 of the Convention (Decisions V/24 and VII/12).

Methodology

Three week’s practical training of a team of eight Wapichan researchers took place in early 2005. The team then carried out three month’s participatory fieldwork in the South Rupununi on their own with logistical support from two local field coordinators. Information was gathered and documented through village discussions, group and individual interviews and participation in traditional practices and cultural activities. It involved visits to 17 major settlements, visits to many minor settlements, 257 separate interviews with elders, leaders and community members, 17 public meetings, and over 30 site visits to different resource areas. In accordance with customary methods of investigation, the researchers engaged in informal discussions (“gaffing”) with holders of traditional knowledge in the early morning, in the evenings or after *manoru* work (collective self-help), often over a traditional gourd of *parakari* (cassava beer). Research also involved a desk-based analysis of relevant laws and national policies.

Following fieldwork, the co-authors collaborated over several months and through a writing workshop to draft a report, which was validated in a 5-day workshop in late 2005. The validation meeting involved elders, leaders and senior councillors from all the villages that took part in the study. Participants endorsed the contents of a draft document and developed the recommendations presented in Section 7.



Community leaders, elders and research team at the close of the 10(c) project validation meeting held in Potarinao village in November 2005

2 Indigenous peoples in the South Rupununi

Our grandfathers tell us that long ago the South Rupununi was home to a variety of indigenous peoples. These peoples included the Atoradnao, Daozai,⁶ Tarabainao, Chiibizai dinnao, Arokonnao, Parau yannao, Paowishiyannao, Maoyanao, Karapunnao, Taromnao, Nikanikarunao, Burokotona and Macushi peoples, as well as our own people: the Wapichannao.⁷

Some of these peoples like the Atoradnao, Parau yannao, Daozai and Paowishiyannao spoke languages and followed customs similar to those of the Wapichan, while others like the Burokotona spoke Carib languages.⁸ While there was sometimes conflict between different peoples, there were also friendly and ceremonial relations and trading among individuals and communities.⁹ Many of these former peoples suffered a heavy death toll from diseases such as small pox, measles and influenza introduced by the Dutch and Portuguese in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ They also endured heavy losses through slave raids during colonial times. During the later colonial period, populations began to re-group in some parts of the Rupununi where they established mixed communities of Wapichan, Atorad, Daozai and Macushi families.¹¹ Surviving Atorads and Taruma people often intermarried with Wapichan communities, and so today quite a few of our people have at least one grandparent or great grandparent that was Atorad or Taruma. Even after a long history of intermarriage, there are still a few people in our communities that identify themselves as Atorad or Taruma.¹²

Today, the population in all the settlements in the Southern Rupununi is predominantly made up of people who identify themselves as Wapichan (94.5%). Two exceptions include the village of Shurinab in South Central District, which is a mixed Macushi-Wapichan village; and the village of Parabara, which is a mixed Wai Wai-Wapichan village on the Kuyuwini River in the southern part of the South District [Map 1]. As noted above, there are also Atorad, Taruma and Arawak families who live alongside the Wapichannao.

This section describes the size of Wapichan communities in Guyana and the extent of our territory. The discussion highlights the richness of plants and animals found in the region where we live. It concludes with a discussion of our own categories of landscape and land use, before examining our customary uses of biological resources and associated traditional practices in sections 3 and 4.

The Wapichan people and their territory

Our people speak Wapichan which is a language that belongs to the Arawak family of languages. Our traditional lands span the Rio Branco-Rupununi savannah and adjacent forests and mountains over a region that is today sub-divided by the Brazilian State of Roraima in the West and the Southern Rupununi District of Guyana (Region 9) in the East. Today we still have Wapichan relatives who live in communities in Brazil.

Our elders advise that this area was occupied by two major territorial groups of Wapichan people – alongside related and other peoples that have declined or no longer exist as noted above. These two groups consisted of a western and northern Wapichan and a southern and eastern Wapichan population.

⁶ The Daozai were a sub-group of the Atorad (Henrico Henry, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05)

⁷ Austin Isaacs, Potarinao, 03/05; Paul Stancilas, Potarinao, 03/05; Daniel Kinchin, Potarinao, 03/05

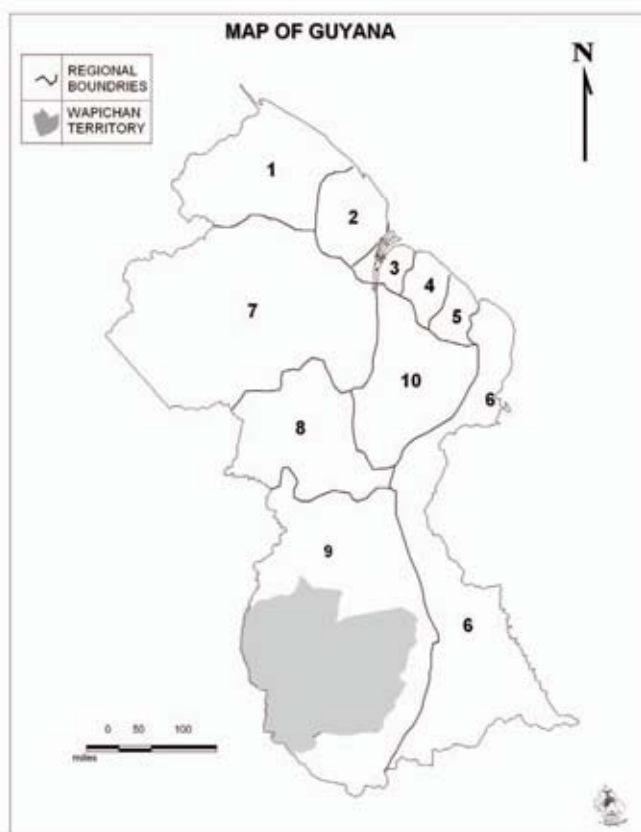
⁸ Peoples related to the Wapichannao with similar languages are the Atorad, Daozai, Paowishiyannao, Karapun and Parauyan (Kinchin Daniels, Potarinao, 03/05).

⁹ Lorenzo John, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05; Hilary Sabah, Shizizi, 03/05; Mevis Caitan, Suburuin, 03/05.

¹⁰ Tony James, Aishara Ton, 02/05

¹¹ Eugene Andrews, Suburuin, 03/05; Christopher Daniels, Parikwarinao, 03/05.

¹² A few Atorad and Taruma families in the Rupununi still speak their own language.



Map 1 The South Rupununi Region in Guyana showing Wapichan *Wiiz* (Wapichan territory)

The western group occupied the upper Rio Branco river basin and savannah and lands to the North towards the Pakaraima mountains. The eastern and southern Wapichan group occupied the Rupununi South Savannah and forest lands to the east in the river catchments draining into the Rupununi and Essequibo rivers.¹³ This latter group were called by the western group the *Taodaz sano* “People of the forest edge.”

We Wapichan have occupied and used the Rupununi for generations. Our communities were already living here in the eighteenth century when the first Dutchmen entered the region.¹⁴

The full extent of our territory in Guyana belongs to all of our Wapichan people. For this reason we say *ipai’o wainao Wachinao wiizi* “The Wapichan territory is all of ours.” All Wapichan in Guyana have the right to move freely on our lands and all of our people have the right to farm, hunt, fish and gather resources to maintain their family and community and be self-sufficient.

We occupy and use our collective land according to our own customary system of land tenure and resource use that still operates across our territory (Sections 3 and 4). All of us Wapichan feel a strong connection to our ancestral territory that we call *wa wiizi* “our homeland.” We say *wa wiizi wuru’u aonaa turuu wakasha paan niiz* “this is our land and we cannot be parted from it.” We feel affection for our territory because our foreparents lived here and because this land provides for us like a mother. We also believe that the animals, birds and fish in our territory are like our ancestors and they give themselves to us so we may survive.¹⁵ This is why we love our land. Our forefathers advised us to stay on our land and to live and share together.¹⁶

No-one bothers us here. We have freedom to fish and hunt. We do not pay for land or timber. Our ancestors lived here first. I was born here and so were my children and grandchildren. The plants grow healthy, the land is beautiful and the water is sweet. We do not quarrel over our homeland. It is peaceful. We feel close to our lands [Robert Moses, Suburuin, 02/05]

We were born right here and we have always stayed here. We feel for our territory because of our farmlands and because we can find everything we need for our children and grandchildren. We need our land for our grandchildren and those coming after them [Olaf Daniel, Parikwarinao, 03/05]

¹³ Simon Marcello, Aishara Ton, 01/05

¹⁴ Community meeting, Achawii, 03/05. For historical records of Wapichan in the Rupununi in the eighteenth century, see, for example, Harris and de Villiers (1911) at pages 302-303 and Whitehead (1998) at page 156

¹⁵ Henrico Henry, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05; Raymond Peter, Baitoon, 03/05

¹⁶ David Johannis, Achawib, 03/05; Theo Griffith, Awaru Wa’o Naawa, 03/05; Francisca Augustine, Awaru Wa’o Naawa, 02/05; Valentino Pablo, Marora Naawa, 03/05; Martin Caitan, Sawari Wa’o, 02/05; Ernest Cyril, Katoonarib, 03/05;

Population and settlements

The indigenous population in the South Rupununi numbers around 8,395 (Box 1). We are settled in 13 main villages, nine smaller satellite settlements, 256 larger homesteads and hamlets, hundreds more individual households as well as many semi-permanent and temporary farm, hunting and fishing encampments that are widely dispersed across our territory [Map 2].

South	
Aishara Toon	1,200
Shii	380
Karaodaz Naawa	952
Marora Naawa	781
Awaru Wa'o Naawa	590
Achawib	580
Parabara	100
South Central	
Showaru Wa'o	554
Katoonarib	426
Shurinab	583
Potarinao	570
Shizizi	90
Baitoon	224
Parikwarinao	170
Katu'ur	218
Suburuin (S Creek)	727
Zoopo Nao	250
Total	8,395

Box 1 Amerindian Population in the South Rupununi in 2005 (estimates based on village meetings in February and March 2005)

Since the early colonial times our people have sought to protect their territory from invasion by outsiders. In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, Wapichan communities resisted Dutch expeditions to the Rupununi region, though such resistance was later put down by the colonial power.¹⁷ During the prolonged negotiation over the limits of national borders between Guyana and Brazil in the nineteenth century, our leaders sought British protections from slave raiders and official recognition of their territory in the Southern Rupununi. To this end, several joint delegations of Wapichan, Atorad and Macushi travelled to Georgetown on the coast to make representations to the British authorities.¹⁸

The British did respond to calls to help protect our communities from slave raids, but did little to recognise our land rights. Instead they declared our ancestral territory as Crown lands and issued grazing permits to colonists. In 1860, a Dutchman named de Rooy introduced cattle and settled at a spot near the Rupununi river.¹⁹ In the 1890s, De-Rooy was bought out by a Scotchman named H P Melville who obtained grazing leases from the British authorities and later became the District Commissioner in 1905.²⁰ In 1919, all the Rupununi Savannah south of the Kanuku mountains was handed over under a long-term lease to the Rupununi Development Company (RDC) for ranching after which the Company established its base at Dadanawa on the banks of the Rupununi River. After pressure from the communities and some British administrators, the RDC did return some lands around Sand Creek in the 1930s.

¹⁷ Whitehead (1998) at page 156.

¹⁸ Henrico Henry, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05. See also Hemming, J (1987) at pages 326 and 329.

¹⁹ Ernesto Johnson, Achawii, 03/05

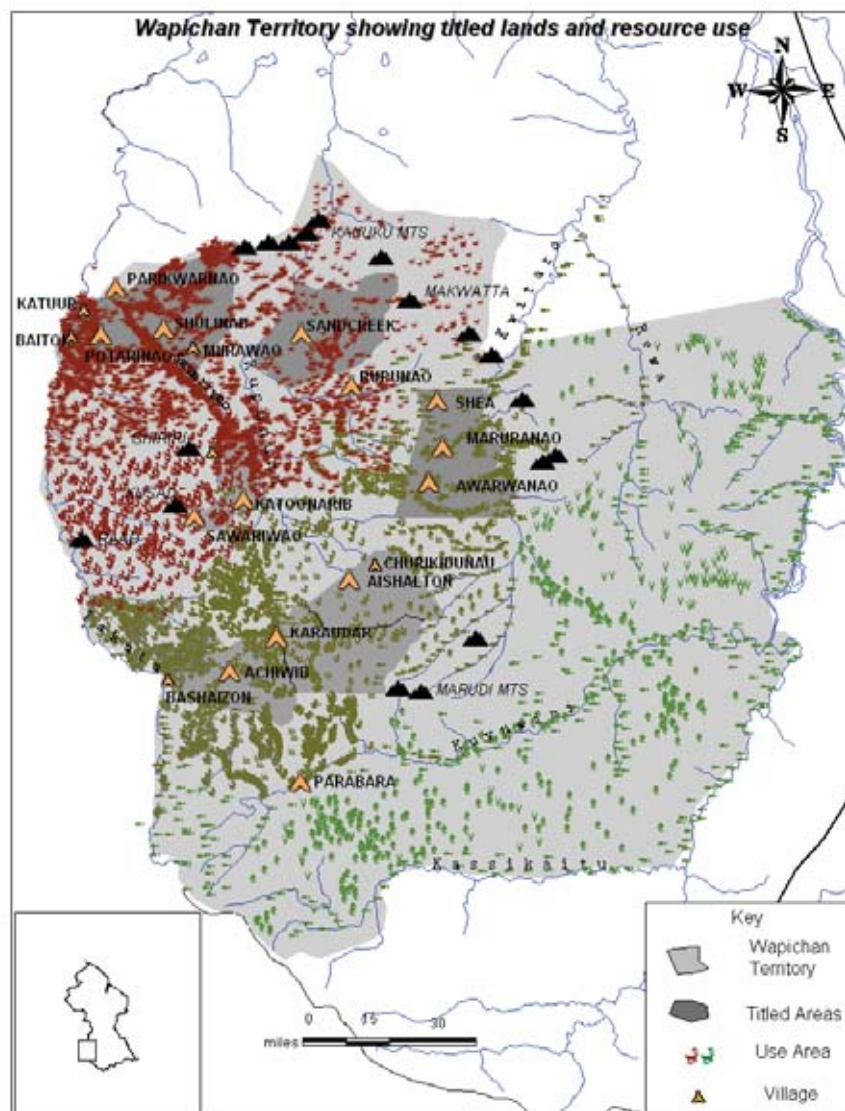
²⁰ Turner (1972) *The Rupununi Development Company Limited: the early history*, Autoprint Guyana, Georgetown at pages 7-8.

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In the late 1940s, the Company gave back limited areas of land in the east to the communities of *Shii*, *Marora Naawa*, *Awaru Wa'o Naawa*, *Aishara Ton* and *Karaodaz Naawa*. This area was then fenced off with a disputed boundary that came to be known by our forefathers as the “Company Fence.” In 1948, some colonial officials recommended that the whole area in the South Rupununi be declared an Amerindian District, but this proposal was not taken up by the British authorities (this study was unable to confirm the reasons for this decision).²¹

Land Claim presented to the Guyana Amerindian Lands Commission

Both the Dutch and the British, and the successor state of Guyana, asserted that all lands not held under grant from the state were crown lands. However, the Independence Agreement between Great Britain and Guyana contained a condition relating to indigenous peoples requiring that “the legal ownership of lands, rights of occupancy and other legal rights held by custom or tradition” be legally recognised without distinction or disability. To comply with this, a Guyana Amerindian Lands Commission was established in 1966. This commission travelled to the Rupununi to hear evidence from Wapichan Captains and community members.



Map 2 Wapichan Wiizi, Guyana, showing traditional territory, customary land and resource use, and main villages

²¹ Peberdy, PS (1948) *Report of a Survey of Amerindian Affairs in the Remote Interior*, Colonial Development and Welfare, Scheme No. D.246, January 1948

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In the Southern District, the Wapichan communities of *Aishara Ton*, *Shii*, *Marora Naawa*, *Awaru Wa'o Naawa*, *Karaodaz Naawa* and *Achawib* presented a joint land claim for collective ownership over an integral territory that includes all "... land lying between these villages."²² In a memorandum presented to the Commission dated 30th October 1967, the Captains of the six villages affirmed:

We Amerindians were the original people of this country, and as such we feel that, we the Wapishana of these villages, should have rights to own the land on which we build our houses, to own land on which we farm, to own land on which we rear cattle, to own land on which we hunt; to own the land on which we cut timber for our houses, to own mineral rights on our lands, to own the water rights for fishing, drinking and swimming, and to claim these rights for our children for all time²³

The six Captains also detailed the extent of their claim as follows:

From the junction of the Kawariwau and Takatu Rivers in a straight line to Mamid Mountain, from thence in a straight line to the source of the Miliwau River, (tributary of the Quitaro) thence due east of North East to King George V fall, on the Essequibo River, from thence due South along the source of the Essequibo River to the junction with the Kassikaityu River to Serra Uossary Mountain, from thence due north west to the source of the Takatu River, thence due north along the course of the Takatu to the junction of the Kawariwau and Takatu Rivers.²⁴

In South Central, the Captains of Shurinab, Sand Creek and Potarinao likewise submitted their own joint claim to traditional lands north of and adjacent to the territorial claim of the South communities. Both of these claims were also integrated with the land claim submitted by Sawari Wa'o village.²⁵ In all cases, our communities requested communal land title.

Unresolved land claim

Unfortunately, the Commissioners did not accept the demand of our leaders as they considered that the land claim was "excessive and beyond the ability of the residents to successfully administrate and develop." Our communities have never accepted this assertion made by the ALC. We maintain that we do indeed have capacity to administer our territory and the Wapichan people have an inherent right to own and control the full extent of our traditional lands. Yet until today, our territory as defined by the submissions we made to the Amerindian Lands Commission in 1967 has not been recognised by the State of Guyana. Since 1977, eleven of our twenty two principle communities have received a limited land title to a small portion of their lands, which does not cover the full extent of our territory and leaves many of our families living on and farming lands without title.

This study has confirmed that more than half of the total number of larger homesteads and hamlets in our territory do not have land title or lie outside the limited titles of their parent village. In addition, six of our larger communities and one Wai Wai-Wapichan village have no title at all: *Sawari Wa'o*, *Katoonarib*, *Shizizi*, *Parikwarinao*, *Katu'ur*, *Zoopo Nao* and *Parabara*. Our Toshaos and communities still uphold their claim to the whole of the territory of the Wapichan people in the Southern Rupunini as defined by our leaders in 1967. We continue to demand that legal title be given to the communities over their lands [Map 2]. This position has been repeatedly affirmed in dialogue with the Government and in successive decisions made by our Village Councils and our District Toshaos Councils. Our present leaders and former leaders who made submissions to the Amerindian Lands Commission are bitterly disappointed that little progress has been made over securing our rightful lands over the last 38 years:

²² Amerindian Lands Commission (1969) at page 5.

²³ *Memorandum from Captains of South Savannahs, Rupununi, Aishalton Village, South Savannah, Rupununi District, 30th October 1967*, signed by H Winter, Stanislaus Lawrence, Ritchie Moses, Edmund Anton, Marco Andrew and Indase Johnson

²⁴ Amerindian Lands Commission (1969) at page 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.* at pages 89-91.

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We only claim the lands already submitted nearly 40 years ago to the Amerindian Lands Commission. We are not talking about small individual titles or limited areas around our villages. We still call for full communal title to all our lands. The Government of Guyana has an obligation to address our land claims since the time of independence. This is what our elders and leaders have been saying for years...Many of us live and occupy land outside the small existing villages titles that were drawn up without full consultation of our people... We need all of our lands to maintain our way of life, our culture, and our traditional practices” [Jerome Marques, Toshao, Sawari Wa’o, 02/05]

We have no land title. The people in our community are not comfortable without title. They feel they are not safe. Our previous applications for title have never been answered. We feel it is time to give title to all of the Wapichan communities together” [Community meeting, Zoopo Nao, 03/05]

The demarcated and titled land is just a small part of our hunting, fishing and farming grounds. We use land and resources far beyond the village title area. This is why we want all our traditional land titled as one territory for all the Wapichan people to use” [Lorenzo John, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05]

We still want our lands fully respected. We want our lands secured for our children and grandchildren. We will never give up our claim to all our lands and we will keep insisting that the land issue is resolved ... We want to own and control our hunting and fishing grounds. We do not want these areas to be controlled by others. Those areas are like our storehouse and our super market. All the years after we made our land claim to the Lands commission, nothing has been done. We have only been given titles to *mapas kau dau* “a small part.” We still claim *wa wiizi bau-kopa’o* “all of our territory.” All these lands are *baukopa’o wa mashap kiizi* “the place where we live together.” *Waipian idi wa wiizi* “We need our land.” I want to see our land recognised before I die [Daniel Kinchin, former Toshao, Potarinao, 02/05]



Our people hold a rich body of traditional knowledge. They also have memories of their dealings with the colonial authorities and the State regarding land and resource issues. Daniel Kinchin (pictured left), a Wapichan elder and former Toshao of Potarinao village, recalls presenting the Wapichan land claim to the British authorities in Georgetown in the early 1960s. He also remembers submitting evidence to the Amerindian Lands Commission on their visit to the Rupununi in 1967.

Wapichan understandings of landscape, habitat and territory

Over generations of occupation our communities have accumulated a detailed knowledge of the variation in our environment and of the diversity of plant and animals found in the South Rupununi. Traditional knowledge includes an understanding of the variety and qualities of soils found in different the parts of the landscape. Wapichan farmers, for example, can tell something about the fertility of the soil by the types of wild plants growing there. We have names for many different types of animal, plant and insect and we watch their behaviour, particularly the behaviour of fish and game animals. We know their diet and where they feed, at what times of the year and which are their favoured habitats. Much of our knowledge about plants and animals and our natural environment comes from our customary occupation and use of the South Rupununi savannahs and forests over generations.

Much of our views about our territory are shaped by our traditional beliefs and spiritual relations between us and our environment (Section 4). Our fore parents named many features on our lands, including even the smallest creek and lowest hill. Our own community maps have recorded several thousand place names in our territory (Section 5). Most place names are in the Wapichan language, but names derived from Atorad are not unusual towards the South.

Many place names are taken from the local ecology and plants and animals that are abundant at the place. For example, *Achawib* means “Place with abundant wild garlic”, *Baruwada Taawa* means “Purpleheart Tree Mountain” (*Peltogyne porphyrocardia*) and *Borashao Naawa* means “Blue-headed parrot Hill” (*Pionus menstruus*). Other places take their names from the exploits of ancestors, culture heroes, legendary characters or bush spirits.²⁶ *Ka’ao Kūzai*, for example, means “Mermaid place” and takes its name from a legendary woman who occupied a pool at that place.



Part of Wapichan *wiizi* in the western part of the territory, looking northeast towards Raada Mountain

²⁶ Julia Paul, Aishara Ton, 02/05; Gabriele Antone, Shii, 02/05; Gabriel St. Hill, Zoopo Nao, 02/05; Mary Marco, Suburuin, 03/05; Augustus Simon, Suburuin, 03/05; Winston Chapelle, Shizizi, 03/05; Raymond Griffith, Shizizi, 03/05.

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The territory of the Wapichannao is comprised of mountainous areas, forests, stretches of savannah with “islands” of forest, and extensive forests that in places have small “islands” of grassland. The South Rupununi has a diverse landscape that has many different features, which we distinguish by name. We identify the following major habitats and different landscapes in our territory *kanoko* “Forest”; *midikuo* “Mountains”; *baarazi* “Savannah” *katonaru* “Bush island” [patch of forest in savannah] *midikuo – baarazi* “Mountains-savannah” *kanoko–baarazi* “Forest-Savannah” [savannah-forest edge] *wa’ozi – kanoko* “Creek forest” [gallery forests on savannah]; *wa’ozi danamada* “Creek edge”; *uwa’ozi* “River/creek”; *karishii* “Lake/pond”; and *baawuzi* “swamp.”

In addition to these 11 broad categories, this study has documented a further 37 named habitats that our communities identify to distinguish different landscape features (these are not listed here due to constraints of space). Many of these habitats support particular animal and plant communities. Creek margins, for example, support groves of trees and palms like *Dyuwuzi baawa* “Ité palm groves” that are useful to us and decorate our land and make it beautiful.

Different habitats also hold important legendary and historical meaning for our people. Our elders advise that the same Ité palm groves (*Maurititia flexuosa*), for example, represent the ancestors of the Daozai people, who once resided in parts of this territory and continue to occupy the savannahs and gallery forests as Ité palm trees.²⁷



***Dyuwuzi baawa* “Ité palm groves” are a valuable resource that provides multiple materials and cultural items for the Wapichan people. Here, recently harvested palm leaves are drying in the sun next to a palm grove near Katu’ur village (11/05)**

Ecosystems and Biodiversity in the South Rupununi

The South Rupununi features a “complex mosaic of savannahs and forests”, which encompasses two major ecosystems: a savannah-grassland ecosystem that forms part of the Rio Branco-Rupununi savannah; and an extensive tropical forest ecosystem with a variety of vegetation types.²⁸ The climate in the region is marked by a seasonal drought (September-January) and a pronounced rainy season which creates extensive flooding of low-lying savannah areas (April-July).

²⁷ Ian Paul, Aishara Ton, 04/05

²⁸ Jansen-Jacobs, MJ and ter Steege, H (2000) “Southwest Guyana: a complex mosaic of savannahs and forests” in ter Steege, H. (Ed.), *Plant diversity in Guyana* Tropenbos Series 18. Tropenbos Foundation, Wageningen, The Netherlands

Forest types include Low semi-deciduous forest found along the savannah-forest boundary and as forest patches or “bush islands” surrounded by savannah; Medium height mixed evergreen and semi-deciduous gallery forests along the banks of the Rupununi as it flows through the savannah; Tall evergreen mixed rainforest, found throughout much of the upper Essequibo basin; Tall evergreen flooded rainforest on low lying parts of the upper Rii wa’o river and upper Essequibo; Semi-deciduous lower montane forest in the Kanuku foothills; and Evergreen lower montane rainforest above 300m on mountainous terrain.²⁹ The savannah ecosystem is characterised by bunch grass (*Tachypogon spp*), sedges and the Sandpaper tree (*Curatella americana*), with Ité palm growing alongside creeks and on wet and seasonally flooded savannah. Much of the landscape features weathered, acid and infertile sandy and lateritic soils formed over ancient rocks of the Guiana Shield. Biological surveys confirm that the region has a high species richness of plants and animals, especially in the Kanuku mountains, parts of the Rupununi Savannah and in the catchment of *Rii Wa’o* (Rewa) River.³⁰ The rich diversity of animals includes large mammals like the endangered giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*)³¹ and large reptiles, including the giant Amazonian river turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*), and threatened fish like the Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*). Gallery forests on the savannah also support rare birds, such as the Hoary-throated spinetail (*Synallaxis kollari*).

Responding to change

Present day use of biological resources by indigenous communities in the South Rupununi can be partly viewed as an adaptation of customary use in response to major economic, cultural and institutional influences introduced since the colonial period. Since the early 20th century, we have experienced significant changes in settlement patterns and have adopted new institutions like the Village Council at the community level (Section 5). Over the last century we have successfully integrated into our livelihoods a range of activities linked to commerce in balata, beef, agricultural crops, craft items and precious metals. Most Amerindian families in the Rupununi today now make a living through mixed livelihoods that involve traditional subsistence activities and as well as commercial activities geared towards earning a cash income.

From the 1920s until the 1970s many families were involved in bleeding balata from the bullet wood tree which they traded for manufactured goods and cash.³² Our communities were able to integrate this sustainable extraction with traditional livelihoods as balata bleeding took place mainly after the period of felling and planting farms. Since the decline of the balata trade in the late 70s, latex is only used to make subsistence items and to make figurines for sale to tourists. Many of the old balata trails are still used to visit hunting, fishing and gathering grounds (Section 3).

Cattle were introduced to the Rupununi in the late nineteenth century (see above). High stocking densities and fencing, associated with the large scale ranching operations of the Rupununi Development Company (RDC), generated disputes between the Company and our communities. Disputes mainly centred on restrictions on access to the savannah for traditional activities. In some cases, families in the South Central Rupununi relocated their homes to join other Wapichan communities in the South to avoid harassment by the RDC. Despite these conflicts, over the years a significant number of Wapichan and Makushi obtained work on commercial ranches where they learnt new skills in animal husbandry. Many became skilful horsemen and today quite a few families keep horses on the savannah. Leatherwork for saddles has become integrated into our craft system which uses a mix of traditional and introduced materials to make high quality tack. Horses and cattle have also come to be used as draft animals pulling carts. These modes of transport help us to travel to and from our often distant farming grounds with heavy loads and materials (Section 3).

²⁹ Huber, O, Gharbarran, G and Funk, V (1995) “Vegetation Map of Guyana (preliminary version) 1:1,000,000 – Centre for the Study of Biological Diversity, University of Guyana, Georgetown

³⁰ Funk, V A and Richardson, K S (2002) “Systematic Data in Biodiversity Studies” *Systematic Biology* (2002) **51**(2):303-316 at page 311

³¹ Groenendijk, H, Hajek, F and Schenck, C (2004) *Pteronura brasiliensis* in IUCN (2004) *IUCN List of Threatened Species* www.iucnredlist.org

³² Baldwin, R (1946) *The Rupununi Record* The Barbados Advocate Company, Barbados at page 54

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Several Wapichan and other Amerindian households in the Rupununi have reared their own cattle for generations. Today, every community has at least a few families that keep cattle. At the same time, most villages maintain a community herd. Grazing areas are not fenced, but they are agreed collectively by the whole community. Pastures are usually well away from settlements and farming grounds and allocation of grazing rights does not in any way limit traditional access rights for hunting, fishing and gathering by other members of the community (Section 4).

Cattle ranching has thus in some ways complemented and enriched our culture and helped us to sustain our extensive farming system. One down side of ranching has been the use of fire to maintain pastures. Such fires have sometimes got out of control and damaged bush islands and dry forest. Here too, however, our communities and Village Councils have enacted rules to stamp out uncontrolled burning and minimise fire damage (Section 5).

Since the decline of the balata trade, families with access to better soils have turned to commercial peanut farming, which they have so far managed to integrate within traditional system of shifting cultivation and crop rotation (Section 4). Others have turned to seasonal migration to obtain paid work in Brazil. As in the time of balata, married men usually organise their time so that their work away earning money takes place after they have cut and planted their new family farms each year. A few people engage in small-scale artisanal gold mining in the Deep South. Like other commercial work, this activity is mainly seasonal.³³ Although trade and paid work are occasional among adults, there are concerns that there is a trend towards more permanent migration among younger people in search of paid jobs. This migration issue is being addressed by our Village Councils and Regional Tosaos Councils as part of a long-term collective effort to develop sustainable income sources within our territory (Section 5).

In addition to adaptation to introduced economic activities and new technologies, since the early 20th century our people have adapted to new institutions like churches and schools in our communities. These institutions have brought changes in our settlement pattern as our villages have become larger and more permanent. Section 3 below shows how we have responded to these changes by adjusting our land use and occupation to enable us to continue our traditional low intensity shifting cultivation. Such institutions have, however, undoubtedly brought some cultural impacts. Some Churches, for example, have sought to forbid their congregations from using traditional shamanic healing services, which has undermined the public role of the *marunao* “shaman” in some communities. For many years, any use of Amerindian languages in class was forbidden under previous school rules, which weakened the use of our mother tongue among some younger people, who have come to use English as their first language. Nevertheless, our parents and grandparents have continued to pass on traditional knowledge and practices to the younger generation at weekends and during the extended school holidays at Christmas, summer and Easter.

More recently, young leaders in our community have sought to promote the Wapichan language in schools through our *Wapichan Wadauniinao Ati’o* (WWA) “Wapishana Language Project.” We have drawn on the linguistic skills of missionaries and others to develop our own alphabet so that we can write our language. Today our leaders and Wapichan school teachers continue to press the Ministry of Education to adopt a bilingual and intercultural curriculum that values our culture and teaches our history to our children.

Our forefathers responded to massive population loss caused by exposure to introduced diseases and predation by slave raiders – by re-grouping, reorganising and forming new (often multiethnic) settlements. In recent years, our population has begun to recover and our numbers are growing again. Our Village Councils are already rising to the challenges of a growing population through the development of environmental rules and community projects that seek to respond to the growing local demand for resources (Section 5).

³³ Although mining tends to be part time, our communities and leaders have growing concerns about the long-term social, cultural and health impacts of mining on our communities. See Colchester, M, la Rose J and James, K (2002) *Mining and Amerindians in Guyana: exploring indigenous perspectives on consultation and engagement within the mining sector in Latin America and the Caribbean* APA/NSI Final Report at pages 116-132

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Crucially, they also continue to seek to secure legally the full extent of our territory through our longstanding land rights campaign which aims to gain recognition of our inherent rights and secure and protect our extensive land use system which underpins our traditional practices and the sustainable use of our environment (Section 5 and Section 7).

In short, some aspects of Wapichan custom show remarkably resilience whilst others are highly flexible and adaptable. It is in this context that the presentation of our customary use of biological resources and associated traditional practices are presented in Sections 3 and 4.



Over 99% of the population in the South Rupununi is made up of indigenous Amerindian communities. Young people make up the majority of our population.

3 Customary Use of Biological Resources

All of Wapichan territory in Guyana is extensively used by our people and it is our custom to identify some parts of our territory according to their use (Table 1). Forests on the mountains and hills in the northern, eastern and southern areas are used for gathering of craft, construction and medicinal resources. The same areas are also used for hunting and the collection of bush foods, and the lower slopes are sometimes used for farming. Rivers, creeks, lakes and ponds are used for fishing and as routes for travel and transportation by boat and canoe.

Many of our hunting, fishing and gathering grounds are distant from our villages and homesteads and we spend several days walking to reach those areas. During these trips, we stay in traditional camp sites. Shifting cultivation and rotational farming are mainly carried out in the bush mouth (forest-savannah edge) in the eastern and southern part of our territory. In the savannah areas to the west, bush islands are used for farming and for the extraction of useful materials. The savannah is used mostly for hunting and gathering and the rearing of livestock. Numerous ox-cart and jeep roads connect villages and hamlets in the savannah and along the bush mouth. All parts of the savannah and forest are accessed via many footpaths which all have names in Wapichan (see below). After generations of occupation and use, existing and former settlement sites, camps, farm fields, farm fallows cover all corners of Wapichan wiizi (Map 3).

Table 1 Some key Wapichan land use categories

Term	English gloss	Comments
<i>wiizai</i>	village	
<i>wiizai-daun</i>	former village site	
<i>kabaun</i>	house	
<i>kabaun-daun</i>	former house site	
<i>baaranai</i>	burial ground	
<i>zakapu</i>	farm field	swidden
<i>piidauni</i>	old fallow field	
<i>zakapuap kiizai</i>	farming grounds	
<i>kotuainao piidaun</i>	ancestor farm	Old farm fallow/secondary forest
<i>koraara</i>	ranch	
<i>tiwaapa-kiizai</i>	hunting ground	
<i>tiwaapa karu ponana</i>	hunting line	
<i>kopau tap-kiizai</i>	fishing ground	
<i>ponaa</i>	trail	
<i>dunapo saba</i>	track/footpath	literally, “narrow road”
<i>dunapo</i>	road	main trail or road
<i>iziaritapa-kiizai</i>	Balata tree ground	Still occasionally used for crafts
<i>iziar san wiizib-daun</i>	old balata camp	Literally: “balata person’s old house site”
<i>iziar sannao pona-daun</i>	old balata trail	
<i>da’awu-kiizai</i>	camp	literally- “sleeping place”
<i>kopau tupaiznao wiizib</i>	fishing camp	
<i>tiwaap kiizai wiizib</i>	hunting camp	
<i>wiiziba</i>	camp	
<i>sookap kiizai</i>	resting place	Located on a long trail

Settlement pattern

In the past, the settlements of our ancestors were composed of several families living in a communal *kowanap* or *okapa* “longhouse” built alongside a large common field cut from the bush, which was sub-divided into family plots. The traditional longhouse sheltered one or several extended families that worked a big farm together under one headman. Settlements were located on sheltered spots near good farm land, high quality potting clay, plentiful hunting and fishing grounds and creeks that flowed during the dry season.

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Wapichan elders explain that our ancestors usually had small settlements of three to six families and preferred to live close to the forest edge, in forest clearings next to creeks and at the foot of mountains in areas that offered good farming soils and some protection from enemies.³⁴ Different extended families formed communities that occupied land and used resources according to a customary system of land tenure and resource rights that still persists today (Section 4). Main settlements were relocated when a relative or leader had died and when our ancestors became “bored” with a place: when meat and fish had become scarce, when good soil under maiden bush became hard to come by, or when a place became troubled by sickness, social conflict or warfare. Our elders can recall many *wiizai-daun* “former village” sites and numerous *kabaun-daun* “former house sites,” throughout our territory. On the savannah edge, former Wapichan settlements are often marked by trees and secondary vegetation.

Since the early part of the 20th century, our main villages have been shifted towards the savannah, due mainly to the influence of the church and missionaries. Although our contemporary main villages were gradually established out on the savannah, right up until the late 1970s many Wapichannao continued to have family settlements deep in the bush where they managed wild bullet wood trees and extensive forest pathways (lines) for balata bleeding.³⁵

Our ancestors had their villages close to their farms in the bush. Villages included Korichowin on *Kootara wa'o* (creek) ... When the mission came, the people built a village out here on the savannah. We have houses and camps on our farmlands and camps in the deep bush until today. We still use those places for farming, fishing, hunting and gathering. [Gabriele Antone, Shii, 02/05]

The old generation liked to move their village from place to place in search of good food and good waters ... Later on they came together in bigger villages when the priests came. [Austin Isaacs, Potarinao, 03/05]

Wapichan settlements in the Southern Rupununi today consist of main villages, satellite villages, hamlets, homesteads, farm camps and hunting and fishing camps that are widely dispersed across the territory. The settlement pattern is a tripartite one, whereby most Wapichan families in Guyana occupy three different family dwellings: a permanent house in the main village, a house or hut on the family homestead or farm camp near to their farming grounds and a semi-permanent hunting and fishing camp in the bush.³⁶ People spend between two to five days a week in the main village and stay at their farm houses in the weekend to carry out farm work. During school holidays, families may stay several weeks or a month at their farm.

Customary occupation of the land

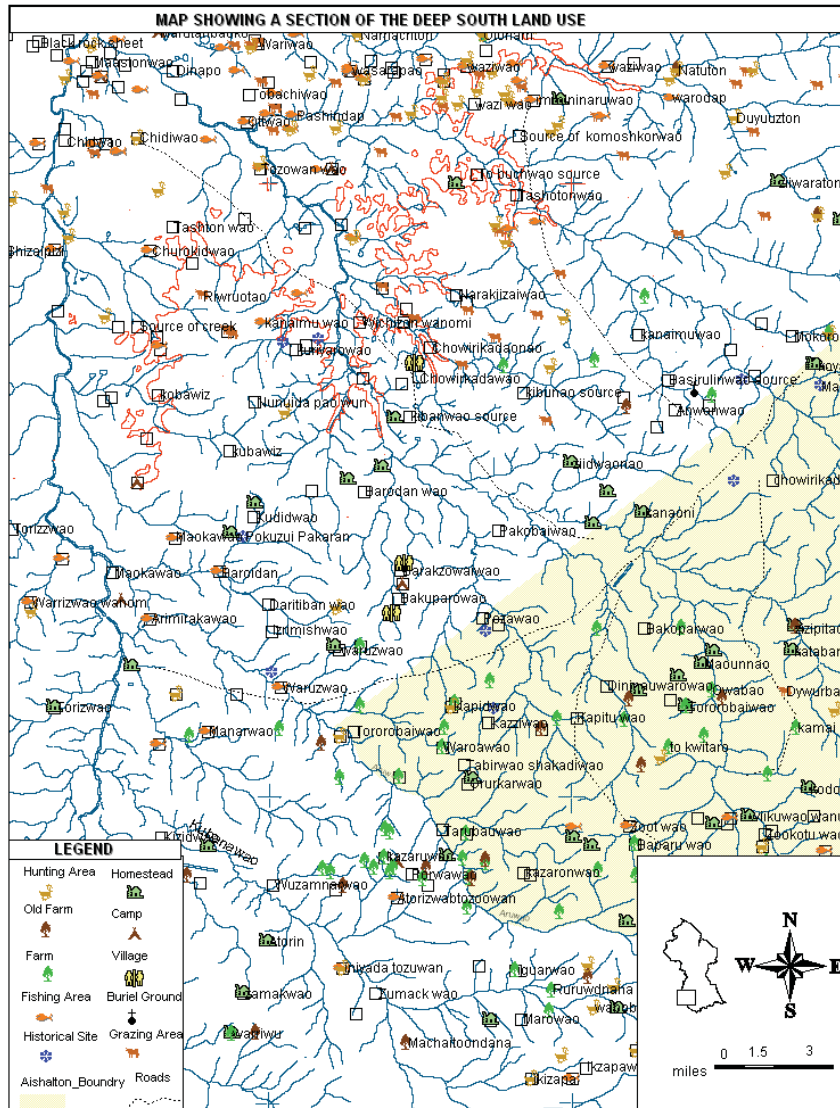
While main settlements in the Southern Rupununi have become larger and more permanent in recent decades, much of the settlement pattern used by our ancestors is still followed. Homesteads and farm camps are still located on the forest edge in the southern and eastern part of our territory. It remains customary that several families occupy a farming ground. Together they make up a small farming settlement group with their own headman. Our villages, homesteads and farmland settlements remain dispersed across the landscape at considerable distances apart from one another in accordance with traditional practice (Section 4). Although homesteads may be occupied for years, families continue to occasionally relocate their country house for family reasons, or to be closer to a farm section where hunting and fishing are bountiful, or to avoid pest infestations at the homestead or at the existing set of farm fields and fallows.

³⁴ Community meeting, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05. In the colonial times, forest and mountain settlements also afforded protection from slave raiders and Brazilian military forces that harassed and persecuted our forefathers: Julia Paul, Aishara Ton, 02/05; Gabriel Antone, Shii, 02/05; Laurentino Manduk, Sawari Wa'o, 02/05.

³⁵ Wildred Pauline, Shii, 02/05; Oswald Williams, Shii, 02/05; Bryan Pedro, Shii, 02/05; David Anastace, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05

³⁶ Lally Kintino, Baitoon, 03/5

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Section of community map showing extensive system of customary occupation and resource use around Aishara Ton village

At the local level, farm camps are regularly moved to be nearer to productive fields that are being worked under our traditional system of shifting cultivation.³⁷ Wapichan families also still move house from time to time due to our ancestral beliefs about sickness and death. While we occasionally move our homesteads and farming grounds, we retain a strong attachment to the land and continue to visit the area for hunting, fishing and gathering. In some cases, Wapichan farmers intend to resettle the same site in the future.

We used to farm for years deep in the bush at Bankut Nao. My brothers followed me there to farm and we had permanent farm houses. I have now moved back to farm in the *kanoko tawuda* “bush edge” as I am getting old. I still plan for my children to return to farm at that place one day. [Oswald Williams, Shii, 02/05]

The relocation of farm sections and farming settlements to different areas within our wider territory has enabled us to maintain our permanent villages. Even if game and other resources have become less abundant near the main village, we continue to enjoy and maintain plentiful farming and fishing grounds by using different areas through a process of shifting agriculture and rotation (Section 4).

³⁷ Elias Horatio, Suburuin, 03/05

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A farm camp on traditional lands surrounding Parikwarinao community



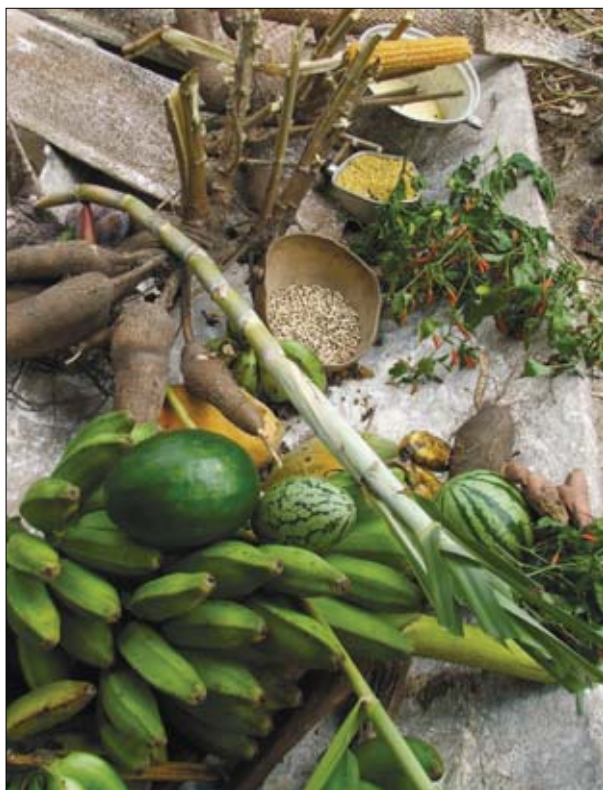
Wapichan homestead at *Kumaka baoko*. Homesteads are often situated many miles away from the mother village



The hamlet of Maroo Ton (nine miles SE of Aishara Ton village), showing traditional Wapichan settlement pattern along the forest edge, 02/05

Farming

Alongside hunting, fishing and gathering, farming is our living. It is *Wapichan kaduzu* “Wapichan custom” for every couple to maintain their own farm field or farm plot to support their family. Many families also maintain home gardens and orchards around their houses. The farm together with our home garden provides us with at least 102 different foods, fibres and dyes. *Kanuzu* “bitter cassava” (*Manihot esculenta*) is the staple crop in our farming system, and this crop predominates in most of our farm fields. We use bitter cassava to make *badi* “cassava bread” and *o’i* “farine” as well as a rich variety of *riwunii* “drinks”, including *sawarao* “cashiri” and *parakari* “cassava wine.” Cassava *waiwa* “starch” is used to make tapioca, and juices derived from cassava processing are cooked to make the spicy condiment *kanuzuu* “cassareep.”



Wapichan farms provide a diverse variety of food, fibre, ritual and medicinal crops

Traditional farming has always been carried out through a system of shifting cultivation in old growth forest or bush fallow forest, under which crops are harvested from a series of working fields, while old fields used in previous years lie fallow. Our system of shifting agriculture is practised over large areas that enable farmers to only re-use land after considerable fallow periods. In this way, the fertility of the soil is maintained:



Traditional varieties of *maziki* “corn”

Alongside bitter cassava, our traditional mixed crop fields are devoted to the cultivation of *kiricha* “yam” (*Dioscorea spp.*), *kawiam* “pumpkin” (*Cucurbita maxima*), *kowun* “eddoe” (*Colocasia esculenta*), *kaazuu* “sweet potato” (*Ipomoea batata*), *kaiwara* “sugar cane” (*Saccharum sp.*), *suuzu* “banana” and *suuzuiman* “plantain”; and for growing grains and pulses like corn (*Zea mays*) and black-eye pea (*Vigna unguiculata*). Our people grow and maintain a large number of crop varieties in their farms and home gardens. For example, research in the sixteen villages involved in this study has documented 106 named varieties of bitter cassava, 18 varieties of yam, ten varieties of maize, 17 varieties of banana and five varieties of plantain.

Tobacco is an important ceremonial and medicinal crop which is traditionally used by the Wapichan *marunao* “shaman.” The farm also provides us with cultivated medicinal plants and many cultivated and semi-domesticated *panankaru* “plant spirit charms” (see below).

It is our custom to move our farms. The land is left to recover. We take only a few harvests and we move the fields around. This is why our traditional farm lands cover large areas. The farms lands on the current small titles are not sufficient. That is why we want all our lands recognised and given title.

(Community meeting, Marora Naawa, 02/05)

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Wapichan farmers cut their main farm fields each year between August and January in *kanoko* “high bush” (old growth forest) or mature *piidaun* “low bush” (secondary forest). In the past, our ancestors used stone axes and fire to fell farms,³⁸ while today we use steel axes. The field is burnt after a month or more. Planting of the main farm takes place after the burn at the beginning of the rainy season (March-May). Another smaller field is often cut in low bush in February or March and is burnt and planted soon after the main field.³⁹

The size of the main annual field varies from between 0.5 and 4.0 acres, while the secondary field is usually less than 1 acre. The area of land used each year depends on the capacity and age of the farming couple, the number of dependent children they must support and the amount of available cassava cuttings and seeds for planting. Today, fields cut to grow peanuts for sale may reach ten acres in size, though most average around four acres.

Wapichan fields are normally cultivated over two to three years to obtain two or three bitter cassava harvests. On good soil, farmers may be able to harvest four successive crops of bitter cassava.⁴⁰ After weeding work has ceased, fallows fields are still visited to harvest pineapples, sugar cane, yams and arrow cane. They are also used for collecting plants that colonise the old field, including the leaf of the *bishawud* “kari mother” that we use to help make cassava beer and wine. There is considerable variation in the length of fallow used by Wapichan farmers in the Rupununi. Field rotation varies from between two and 20 years depending on soil fertility, availability of suitable maiden bush and the preferences and customs of different families.⁴¹

In the eastern and southern part of our territory, Wapichan farmers traditionally locate their farms in the *tawudaz* “forest edge.” In the western part of our territory, savannah villages mainly use *katonaru* “bush islands” for farming as well as forest areas on the lower slopes of hills and mountains. It is our Wapichan custom as well to open small farm plots around our permanent hunting and fishing camps deep in the bush, beyond the main farming grounds. The distance from our villages and homesteads to our *zakapu tap kiizai* “farming grounds” varies across the territory. In some places, such as Meri Wa’o, farming grounds are located just a few miles from people’s homes. In many cases, however, farms lie more than five miles away and some people must travel as much as 10, 20 or even 30 miles to reach their working farms.

Several families use Achawiitao farming grounds one mile north of the village. Others use Pazowanano located about six miles southeast of the village. Some families have farming grounds 12 or 15 miles away around Mororotao, way beyond the present village land title. [Ernest Johnson, Achawii, 03/05]

In Sand Creek, the nearest farming grounds are five miles from the village, while the furthest are located 30 miles away [Jonny Moses, Suburuin, 02/05]

People walk along footpaths known locally as *zakapu pona* “farm roads” to reach their fields. Farm roads radiate from our villages and homesteads towards a multitude of named farming grounds. Each farming ground is occupied by different extended families (Sections 4). In this way, farm tracks are referred to by the name of the family that uses the road. In recent years, people have started to use bicycles, horses and ox-carts to get to and from their distant farming grounds.

Wapichan men are involved in felling farms, while our women dedicate much of their daily work time to cultivating and processing cassava and other crops. Many families carry out large agricultural tasks by hosting and taking part in our traditional *manoru* “collective work party”, through which families exchange their labour to help kin and neighbours (Section 4).

³⁸ Damian Joseph, Marora Naawa, 02/05; Ernest Johnson, Achawii, 03/05

³⁹ Jonny Moses, Suburuin, 02/5;

⁴⁰ In a few exceptional cases, extremely fertile patches of soil can support continuous cultivation with the use of careful crop rotation (Dorothy Augustine, Meri Wa’o, 02/03).

⁴¹ Bernie Ritchie, Shii, 02/05; Elias Horatio, Suburuin, 03/05

Hunting

Wild game meat is highly prized by the Wapichan people who consider proper food should always have a mixture of both vegetables and meat or fish (see below). Hunting is carried out primarily for subsistence⁴² and cultural and community activities.⁴³ When a hunter has killed a large animal or has a good bag, it is customary to share meat with the extended family and with neighbours by giving them cuts from the carcass or inviting them to join a communal meal.⁴⁴

Tiwaapauz-kizai “hunting grounds” are located throughout our territory in the mountains, deep bush, bush mouth, bush islands, savannah and along creek margins. Hunters normally use the same hunting areas used by their fathers and grandfathers⁴⁵. Distance to hunting grounds varies from between a few miles from the home, to as much as 45 miles away. Hunting areas are reached and inter-connected by personal, extended family and community *tiwaapa kiizai ponan* “hunting paths”, which in English we call “hunting lines” (Section 4). These lines often feature a semi-permanent hunting and fishing camp at their end point and may have temporary camps along the route.

Research for this study has documented 86 different wild meats that by custom we eat regularly or from time to time, as well as some that our people eat very occasionally or rarely. Some of the most frequent animals hunted for food are the *aro* “savannah deer” (*Odocoileus virginianus*), the *sokoru* “agouti” (*Dasyprocta agouti*), *oran* “laba” (*Agouti paca*), *bakuru* “bush hog” (*Tayassu tajacu* and *T. pecari*), *kapashi* “armadillo” (*Dasyus novemcinctus*, *D. kappleri* and *Cabassous unicinctus*). Birds are also preferred prey and hunters regularly seek out *maratu* “marudi” (*Penelope spp*) and *bididi* “ducks” (*Cairina moschata* and *Dendrocygna viduata*). Another wild meat we favour is *wurada* “tortoise” or “land turtle” (*Geocheleone spp.*), which is captured by hand in the bush.

Some of our beliefs caution against the regular consumption of particular wild meats. Such meats include, among others, that of the *kodoi* “bush cow” (*Tapirus terrestris*) and the *sowai* “brown bush deer” (*Mazama gouazoubira*).

Game meat is preserved by placing it on a *diparii* “smoking stand.” Today, meat is also preserved by salting and drying in the sun.



The savannah deer (White-tailed deer) is a favoured quarry for Wapichan hunters on the South Rupununi grasslands

⁴² Hunting is rarely carried out for commerce. Wapichan hunters may occasionally sell excess meat to a community member if he or she is in full time paid work, or to passing pork knockers (informal miners) and itinerant traders and contractors. The minor trade in bushmeat in the South Rupununi is thus occasional and small-scale.

⁴³ Kenneth Joseph, Nipizai Ton, 03/05

⁴⁴ Willie Brown, Aishara Ton, 02/05; Ronnie Thomas, Sawari Wa’o, 02/05

⁴⁵ Angus Jackman, Suburuin, 03/05

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Hunting is traditionally carried out with a bow and arrow and a variety of traps. Most hunters also own one or more hunting dogs that are used to flush out and retrieve game.⁴⁶ Hunting dogs are greatly valued and so they command a high “price” in our indigenous economy. Our ancestors used the *kobin* “blow-pipe” and poisoned darts to hunt monkeys, birds and small game. Today, blow pipes have been replaced by the shot gun, but the bow and arrow is still regularly used by Wapichan hunters. Trapping techniques used by our forefathers are still used today as is the ancient method of *watapukara* “beating up” game towards waiting *baichainao* “marksmen” who stand at agreed *zaudap kiizai* “waiting points” with a bow or shotgun. Fire and smoke is also sometimes used to flush out animals from their burrows or from small patches of cover. Another customary hunting method involves the construction of hides or *taradapau* “platforms” at sites where game animals are known to feed and drink, including fruit-bearing trees, pools and salt-licks in the bush.⁴⁷ Hides are also used to shoot game feeding on our crops or on certain plants in our bush-fallows.

The Wapichannao traditionally hunt at *kandukaru* “daybreak” and during the early morning. This *kariptap kara* “daytime hunting” is still practised, particularly in the bush and at the bush mouth (forest-savannah transition). In recent years, *wakanadapan* “night hunting” with flashlights has become a favoured method among some Wapichan hunters on the savannah, where game is sometimes hunted on horseback.

In addition to the daily practice of opportunistic hunting, some hunters go on regular planned hunting trips with a hunting partner or in a small family hunting group. Once or twice a year in December and April, a larger group of hunters engage in a community hunt lasting up to two weeks and visiting distant hunting grounds. These hunts took place traditionally to provide food for the *parichara* dance and other rituals. Today, the same hunts are carried out according to traditional practice to obtain meat for community festivities during national holidays at Christmas and Easter (Section 4).

Many people interviewed for this study report that Wapichan and Makushi families that own cattle, poultry or pigs tend to hunt less than those families that do not own livestock.



**Hunting trap being set to catch small game on the savannah
[Lorenzo John, Karaodaz Naawa, 02/05]**

⁴⁶ Willie Brown, Aishara Ton, 02/05

⁴⁷ Damien Joseph, Morora Nawa, 02/05; Austine Augustine, Meri Wa’o, 03/05; Alfred Fredericks, Shurinab, 03/05

Fishing

Kopau “fish” is a vital part of our traditional diet. When there is a scarcity of fish in our meals, we will often say *aona kanoom wa nikan nii* “we have nothing to eat.” As well as being an important food in our daily meals, specific types of fish are eaten as an essential part of ritual diets during ceremonies and rites of passage. It is our custom, for example, that young women may only eat certain fish and meats when they take part in traditional puberty rites.⁴⁸

The Wapichan people customarily use all the major and minor rivers, creeks, streams, lakes and ponds throughout the territory for fishing, though specific pools, ponds and stretches of river are out of bounds according to tradition (Section 4). The Rupununi River is one major fishing ground used and shared by the majority of the Wapichan and Makushi peoples in our South Rupununi territory.⁴⁹ Fishing is carried out for household use by men, youths and boys in streams and creeks flowing near villages and homesteads on a daily basis throughout the year. Daily fishing is often carried out alone and takes place early in the morning or at night when most fish like to feed. Fishing is done from the river bank or from a canoe using a variety of methods.

The most common techniques involve the use of *kabao na'iki kobao zunaa* “hook and line” *kobawuzii* “fishing rod,” and *somara na'ki bairii* “bow and arrow.” Fish traps remain in common use throughout our territory. The trapping season takes place in July and August as fish move downstream and river levels fall during *waraukan* “the ending of the rainy season.”

At the start of summer, fish trapped in drying pools and streams are also collected by hand, with nets or through the use of poison. In these pools, we also use the method of *maradapaan* “stirring up silt” with our hands to bring fish to the surface to be caught.

Traditional Wapichan fish poisons are also used at this time to catch fish in pools in rivers and creeks in the savannah and bush. Some of these poisons are wild and others are planted in our farms and gardens. Fishing with poisons is carried out according to a number of customary norms (Section 4) and rules agreed by the community, which are today overseen by our Village Councils (Section 5).⁵⁰



The Wapichannaos are renowned as *baitunao* “marksmen” who are skilful with the bow and arrow. Most fishermen have their own favoured waiting spots to shoot fish

As well as day-to-day fishing, it is our custom to go on *kopau pa'anan* “fishing trips” to more distant fishing grounds on rivers and lakes in different parts of the territory. We may go on these trips alone or in a small group to catch larger fish like the *aozapa*, *achimara*, *korizu*, *pachichi* and *arowana* – just to name a few. In the summer, it is also customary for larger fishing parties to go on a collective fishing expedition to poison and catch fish in at the invitation of a local elder or the community

⁴⁸ Joe Marco, Suburuin, 02/05; Eustace Domingo, Katoonarib, 03/05

⁴⁹ John Spencer, Meri Wa'o, 03/05

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Toshao. The elder hosting the fishing activity ensures cultural rules are followed and that all participants receive an equal share of the catch. The Toshao makes sure any extra fish are shared with elderly people back in the main village.

Recently adopted introduced fishing methods used by some fishermen include the cast net, seine net and dive fishing. Seine netting and dive fishing are starting to raise some concerns in our communities about their possible impact on local fisheries in some creeks. In response, our Village Councils and Regional Toshaoes Councils are in the process of developing rules to regulate the use of these new fishing techniques (Section 5).

Customary *Kopau tap-kiizai* “fishing grounds” may range from between one and ten miles from the village or homestead, while others lie between 15 and 30 miles from the village. In many cases, fishermen use the same routes and fishing grounds that were used by their fathers, uncles and grandfathers.⁵¹ The village of *Shii* is a typical example of a community that uses near and distant fishing grounds. The *Kowitaro* River (six hours’ walk east from *Shii*) is fished quite regularly by community members, while the more distant (three days walk) *Chiip Wa’o* (Essequibo River), is visited mainly by collective fishing and hunting parties on a seasonal basis to obtain meat and fish for community festivities, typically during the short dry season (November and December).



Fish traps are used throughout the South Rupununi. In accordance with customary norms, traps are dismantled after use

When fish are abundant in drying pools in the summer, local family heads send messages to kin in their own village and in neighbouring communities to invite them to take part in a fishing expedition



⁵⁰ Alexis Campion, Katoonarib, 03/05; Christie Matthew, Potarinao, 03/05

⁵¹ Winston Chapelle, Shizizi, 03/05; Walter Matthew, Potarinao, 03/05

Gathering

Our territory provides our communities with an abundance of wild foods, craft and construction resources, medicines, spirit charms and other useful resources. In some cases, different parts of the same plant or tree provide us with multiple useful materials used for craft, construction and food. One example is the *dyuwuza* “Ité palm” (*Mauritia flexuosa*). Ité palm leaves are used for thatching and basket-making. Young shoots and fronds are used to make ceremonial costumes. The fruits are eaten fresh or used to make a delicious drink and the sap is used as a medicine. If a mature tree is felled it is used to “grow” edible palm beetles and its outer trunk is stripped to make laths.

We depend on our traditional lands to obtain almost everything we need for craftwork and construction. Here we find our housing materials, clay to make pots, and weaving fibres. Most of us go to the bush to collect these materials. We do not have to spend money on these things. ... This is why we care for these resources. [S. Kintino, Baitoon, March, 2005]”



***Dyuwuza anaba* – Ité palm leaves being used to thatch village sports pavilion, Aishara Ton, 02/05**

Fruits and other wild foods

This study has documented no less than 140 different wild foods, including fruits, nuts, fungi and a variety of edible invertebrates that are customarily gathered by the Wapichan people in forests, uplands, savannah and wetlands in the Rupununi. Detailed knowledge of the location of fruit-bearing palms and trees has been passed down to us from our ancestors. Wapichan families visit nearby and distant areas to collect wild fruit and nuts according to the season. Commonly harvested bush fruits include those of the *mapuza* “turu palm” (*Oenocarpus bacaba*), *pokoridi* “kokorite palm” (*Attalea regia*) and *zoopo* “wild plum” (*Spondias mombin*). Most of these wild fruits are eaten raw or soaked in tepid water.

Some parts of our territory are especially rich in fruit bearing-trees. Certain forest areas, for example, have Brazil-nut trees clustered together in *minau baawu* “Brazil-nut groves.” These groves are visited to collect Brazil nuts that we use to make a tasty drink called *minau daa*. Wapichan families will visit very distant areas of our traditional territory to collect the much prized fruits of *mapuza* and *ochoro* (*O. bataua*) palms, which we use to make a nutritious drink called *mapuz daa*.⁵²

Some of the best fruit gathering areas in our territory are located a long way from our villages. For example, forests rich in fruits are found at *Muru wa’o* 30 miles NE, Purple Rock, 20 miles from here and the head of Arrow Creek which is 25 miles away [Elmo James, Shurinab, March, 2005]

Construction and crafts

Our territory contains a vast variety of useful materials that we use for constructing houses, boats and a wide range of traditional Wapichan craft items, food processing utensils and household tools. Favoured construction and craft material sites are reached by specific lines or via existing hunting and fishing lines. As part of this study, we have documented 263 different natural materials customarily used in construction and tool-making.

⁵² Jonah Simon, Shii, 02/05

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Of this total, 169 resources are hard wood trees used for house posts, rafters, beams, laths, foot bridges and making canoes. Dwellings in farm houses and camps are mainly constructed using traditional methods with a framework of hard wood supports covered in thatch.

Like our foreparents, the Wapichan make use of forest resources for house-building ... there are many different useful timbers. Some of the preferred hard wood trees are *saporadai*, *shoroko*, *baizi*, *tapuzai*, *pishara* and *shuzai*. [Ernest Cyril, Katoonarib, 03/05]

Houses in the main village and permanent homestead houses are today often constructed using a combination of traditional and introduced methods. Most notably, it has become common practice to use sawn boards for flooring. Timber is also used today to make bullock carts and cart wheels.

The local use of timber for boards and construction is generating new rules by Village Councils to set aside timber reserves for domestic use, while commercial extraction has been largely prohibited by our communities (Section 5).



Extraction of laths from the *wabo* palm tree (*Euterpe sp.*)

Throughout our territory there are several types of palm leaves that we use to thatch our permanent homes and to roof our camps away in the forest and savannah. The leaves of the Ité and kokorite palms are used for thatching and also for weaving baskets, fans and mats. The *mamu'uzu* and *tibi* vines (*Clussia sp.*) are used to make baskets and different types of *dapaawai* "warishi" (backpack).

Certain traditional craft materials like *mokoro* "mukru" are found mostly in jungle areas in the eastern and southern part of our territory and so are scarce in savannah areas. Western savannah villages are partly dependent on the forest-edge villages for obtaining these forest resources.

Mukru cane is not found much around here and so we have to order this material from the deep south Rupununi. We make an exchange with families there or we make arrangements to go and harvest in their area. [Gregory David, Katoonarib, 03/05]

Savannah villages also use alternative materials such as *kamawaru* vine found in the bush along creek margins to weave cassava sifters and matapee (cassava press).



Uncle Simon harvesting *mokoro* (*Ichnosiphon sp.*) at Taboronao wiiz, 02/05

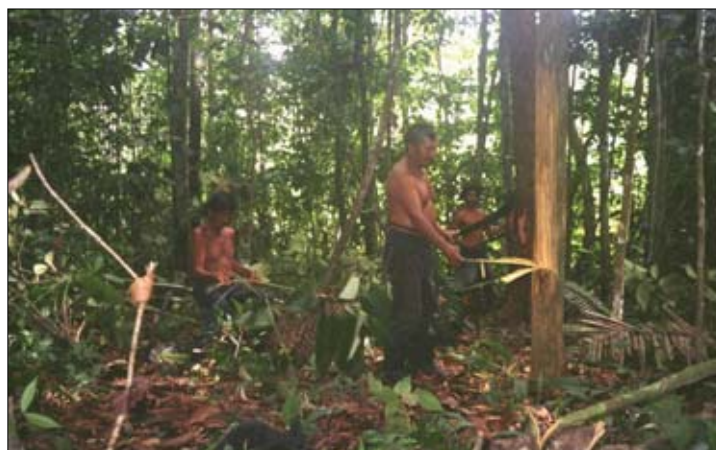


**Weaving *mokoro* fibres to make a *manaru* “cassava sifter”,
Sawari Wa’o, 02/05**

Bush Medicines

Forests, wetlands, mountains and savannah habitats in *Wapichan wiiz* are home to a rich variety of plants and animals that the Wapichan people use to make traditional *kasarai* “medicines.” Knowledge of bush medicines and their uses was passed to ancient *marunao* by our powerful ancestor, Dowid, and so has been passed down to us today.⁵³ Our research has documented 286 wild medicines of which 186 are derived from plants, 61 from animals, reptiles and birds, six from fish, and 33 from insects and other invertebrates.⁵⁴ Savannah plants provide medicines obtained from their leaves and roots. Different forest trees provide us with medicines prepared from their leaves, fruit, seeds and bark.

Many of our most valued traditional medicines are located in *kanoko zokon iti* “deep bush”⁵⁵ as far as two or three days’ walk from our main villages. In Shii, for example, villagers visit areas of the traditional territory to collect medicines in the forest beyond the *Kowitaro* River alongside the *Chiip Wa’o* (Essequibo) river.⁵⁶



Extracting medicinal bark

⁵³ Sylverio Sidney, Parikwarinao, 03/05

⁵⁴ On agreeing the contents and purpose of this research, our leaders and community members in Guyana have agreed that specific details on Wapichan traditional medicine will not be published in this study.

⁵⁵ Peter Felix, Aishara Ton, 01/05; Oswald Williams, Shii, 02/05; Lionel McBirney, Suburuin, 03/05.

⁵⁶ Raymond Simon, Shii, 02/05

(a)	
Korowuin	Gathering area – 0.5 day’s walk – NE
Winter ponaa	“Winter’s line” leading to medicinal and fruit gathering area
Komaran Tao	Gathering area – 1.5 days’ walk, NE
Francis ponaa	“Francis’s line” leading to fruit gathering area
Soomi Dukuo	Gathering area – 2 days’ walk NE
Peta Ponaa	“Peta’s line” leading to medicinal gathering area
Wabo Waka	Gathering area – 1 day’s walk, E
William ponaa	“William’s line” leading to fruit gathering area
(b)	
Dautam zowuo	Medicinal and gathering area – 2.5 days walking NE
Minau w’ao tao	Medicinal and gathering area – 3 days walking NE
Kosho wa’o tao	Medicinal and gathering area – 10 miles North
Karapuda tao	Medicinal and gathering area – 19 miles North
Korowun tao	Medicinal and gathering area – 2 days walking NW

Box 2 Some key routes and sites used by the communities of (a) Suburuin and (b) Zooponao for gathering medicines, bush fruit and craft materials

Spirit charms

The Wapichannao also value and customarily use many plants, animals, fish, insects and amphibians found in our territory for use as *pasānk* “spirit charms.” Research in our communities carried out for this study has recorded the continuing use of many different charms.⁵⁷

We use the land in many different ways. One important activity is the collection of *binas* (charms). I know many different *binas* in my areas and how each one can attract different game, fish, birds or even insects. With these charms I am able to find the game needed by my family. Without these plants, finding food is more difficult. This is why the use of charms is a key part of Wapichannao custom and part of our identity. [Harold Alfred, Parikwarinao, 03/05]

Water, firewood and other useful resources

Wunu “water” is an important resource that is traditionally drawn from springs, rivers, creeks, ponds and lakes and is used customarily for cooking, making drinks, washing, bathing and healing. Flowing water sources are normally clean and potable water can be obtained from most creeks and rivers in our territory. We follow traditional practices to avoid contamination of these waters (Section 4).

Another important traditional resource is *zowaa-karu* “firewood.” According to custom, our communities use a wide variety of different fuel woods for different tasks. In this study, we have recorded 86 different named types of fire wood that are found in the savannah, forests and mountain and are customarily used by the Wapichan. There are also many trees that are not suitable for fire wood that we believe may cause sickness or misfortune if they are used.

Clay is a further important resource for our communities. Our ancestors were very skilful potters and women today still travel to distant creek heads to collect clay to make *kamoot* “goblets” and *koowar* “pots”.⁵⁸

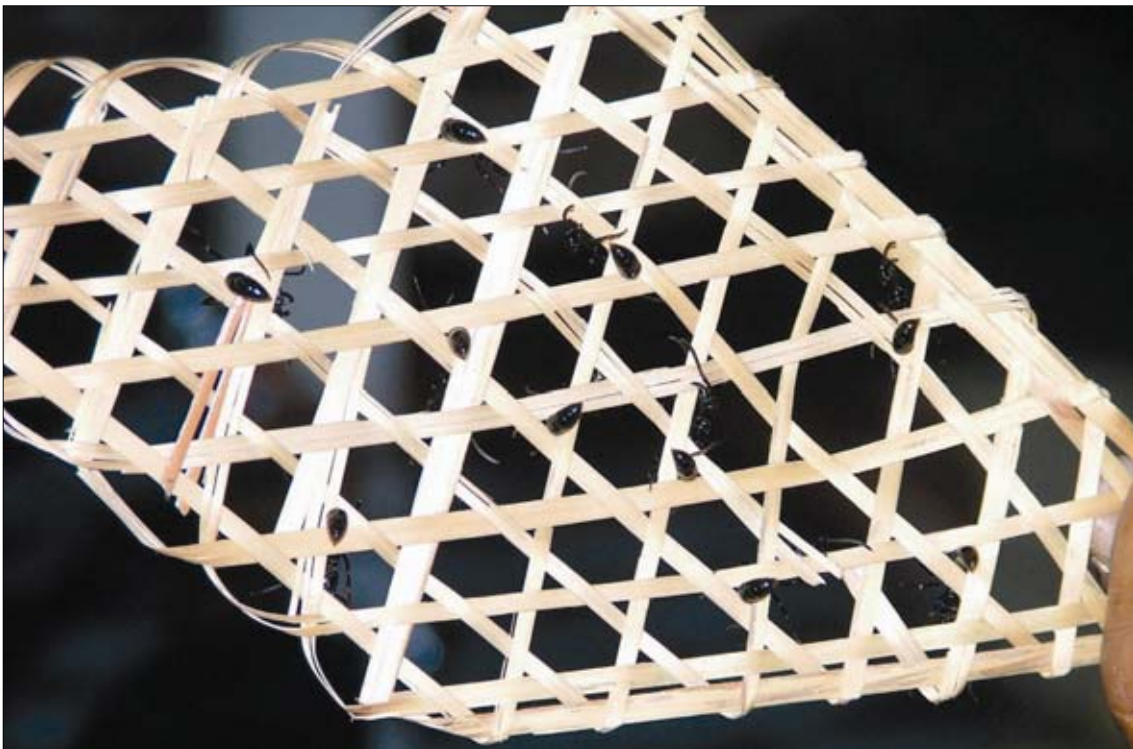
A large variety of resources are also used for ceremonial and ritual purposes. For example, stinging ants are carefully collected and used in rituals to sting different parts of the body to impart strength and fortitude to the recipients (see opposite).

⁵⁷ As in the case of medicinal resources, our communities and their representative organisations who took part in this study have chosen not to publish information on spirit charms.

⁵⁸ Lucy Edward, Sawari Wa’o, 02/05;



The sustainable extraction of latex from the *iziari* “bullet wood tree” (*Manilkara bidentata*) was undertaken on a commercial scale by the Wapichan people throughout the forests of the Rupununi and Upper Essequibo from the 1920s until the late 1970s. Latex has long been used to make ornaments and is today also used to make figurines for toys and trade. This picture shows Theo Griffith and colleagues harvesting latex in forest five miles east of Awaru Wa’o Naawa village. The man in the foreground to the left is holding vines and bark that have been collected for use as traditional fastenings for house construction. (02/05)



Biting ants are customarily used by the Wapichannao in Guyana in rituals intended to impart stamina and bodily vigour to men, women and children. Ants are inserted in a wickerwork frame and carefully applied to different parts of the body. After several applications, the ants are released unharmed.

4 Traditional Practices

Customary use of biological resources is organised and shaped by a set of traditional practices, which encompass Wapichan traditional values, beliefs, institutions, norms and resource use techniques. This study finds that many of these traditional practices promote the sustainable use of biodiversity.

Customary land tenure

Within Wapichan communal territory, access, use and sharing of resources are ordered according to a bundle of customary land and resource rights that specify the entitlements, obligations and duties of resource owners and users. Under our system of common property, customary law stipulates that all Wapichan have the right to use natural resources throughout the territory subject to customary norms, while outsiders are normally excluded (Box 3).

Decision-making and traditional governance

Adult men and women in Wapichan society take individual and autonomous decisions about resource use according to their traditional roles and responsibilities as either a *daiaro* “wife” or *daiaru* “husband.” However, where decisions may affect the resource rights of neighbouring families, according to custom a person must consult with each potentially affected household head and with the local headman, who is usually the head of his or her local settlement group (Box 3). Traditional leaders will, if necessary, consult with the heads of neighbouring settlement and farming groups. Decisions are reached by consensus through consultation with all affected rights holders, local leaders and *tunarut pa’o nao* “elders” – as well as community members who are especially knowledgeable about a relevant resource or task. Traditional decision-making processes are today articulated with elected Village Councils and District Tshaos Councils. The Tshao is thus often involved in internal consultations on resource use, especially where they involve decisions about the extraction of timber, craft materials or bush fruits needed for community work (Section 5).

Under the Wapichan system of land tenure, local family heads hold prior rights and jurisdiction over the farming grounds that they and their extended family occupy and use (Box 3). In the eastern and southern part of our territory, the same heads are sometimes recognised as the owners of hunting lines (e.g., Table 2), which they maintain and oversee, and which they share with other community members (see below). In the western and northern parts of our territory, local headmen are considered to have responsibility for sharing and protecting communal hunting and fishing grounds in their vicinity.

These leaders are respected members of our communities who see themselves as custodians of their local area, which they watch over for the benefit of all Wapichan people. They have an intimate knowledge of the resources and wildlife in their neighbourhood, and hold important spiritual knowledge about the locality. In taking decisions and giving guidance to resource users, traditional leaders uphold Wapichan values and customary laws on the sharing and proper use of natural resources.



Ronnie Thomas is a Wapichan elder who watches over and shares traditional communal hunting and fishing grounds around his homestead near the Takatu river– where he keeps a herd of cattle and monitors movements of people into and out of that part of our territory.

Box 3 Customary system of land tenure

This study has found that the existing land tenure regime that operates throughout Wapichan territory in the South Rupununi (on untitled and titled land) shows much continuity with our ancestral system of land holding and customary resource rights.

Collective territory and communal land holding

The totality of land and associated resources, including rivers, creeks, wetlands, swamps, ponds, savannah, mountains, bush, bush fallows, and all other habitats and spiritual sites that we traditional occupy and use, are together valued as the collective *wiizi* “territory” and homeland of our people. We hold and share this territory together. Every Wapichan person has the right to travel freely over all parts of our territory and to use natural resources for their livelihood and other activities, subject to our customary laws and traditions. No-one in any of our communities anywhere in Guyana is permitted to alienate their farming grounds or any other land to outsiders.⁵⁹ Sale of land to outsiders is strictly prohibited. Settlement and farming rights are not available to outsiders under our system of land tenure.

Community lands

Each village maintains jurisdiction over an extensive area of traditional land (untitled and titled) that is defined by the farmlands, bush, savannah, mountains and other habitats customarily occupied and used by residents of the main *wiizai* “village”, and by affiliated community members living in outlying satellite communities, hamlets and homesteads. Every community has its own farming grounds recognised by neighbouring communities. A claim to rights in community lands is secured through family, marriage or friendship ties to residents of the main village or people living in related satellite communities and homesteads. Wapichan people from neighbouring communities are welcome to extract forest resources within the lands of another village, provided they speak to the Toshao and consult first with knowledgeable local elders and headmen of local farming settlement groups in the area they wish to visit (see below).

Family farmlands

Within community lands, Wapichan families and local residence groups maintain a series of prior rights and hold significant jurisdiction over the local area that they occupy and use for farming and other uses. People refer to this area as their family *amazadati* “place.” Farming and other prior resource rights are enjoyed so long as the family occupy the land, use existing fields and intend to come back to old fallow fields in the future. Once a family moves to another farming area and communicates that it does not intend to return to old fallows, the old fields and associated reserve forest return to the community. The extent of each family farming ground is defined by agreed traditional *awautian* “boundaries” marked by named creeks, hills and mountains or by farm and hunting roads. These boundaries are known by community members based on family history of occupation and land use in different areas. Several related families often occupy shared farming lands and make up a small dispersed settlement with their own headman, who is normally the man who first surveyed and settled the area when it was maiden bush (i.e., currently unoccupied old growth forest), or the person who first inherited the farmlands from senior family, in-laws or friends. The local leader, known as the *zakapu kiizai tin pia’o* “owner of the farming grounds” or the *zakapu kiizai zowaunaa* “farming ground Chief” or *karowaitpao* “headman”, is responsible for allocating farming rights to incomers joining his settlement group. Anyone who wants to farm in a particular area must ask the headman of the local group and also the heads of all the families occupying that area or land nearby. Those wishing to extract or use valuable bush resources within another family’s farming ground, must, by courtesy, seek their permission e.g. construction timber, bush medicine and craft materials, clay, firewood etc. While no prior approval is required from people to open a field or extract bush resources in maiden forest, prior permission must be sought from the bush spirits.

Shared hunting, fishing and gathering grounds

Hunting, fishing and gathering grounds in savannah and forest areas that lie beyond family farming places and village lands are shared by all Wapichan communities. Jurisdiction over these areas is shared between adjacent communities and overseen by traditional authorities – and today also by the District Tshaos Councils (inter-community councils).

Restricted access to outsiders

People who do not belong to our communities are not normally permitted to hunt or fish, nor to harvest medicines, craft, construction or other materials from any part of our territory. If outsiders are seen using a resource or accessing an area without prior permission, local traditional authorities, or community members returning from a visit to the part of the territory affected, will advise the Toshao who may approach the intruders and remind them that they are on Wapichan land and must leave. In the same way, community members visiting distant areas normally advise community authorities of any unusual activity or signs of damaging resource use which they have come across (e.g., illegal mining activity).

⁵⁹ Temporary above-ground improvements like dwellings or crops in farm fields may be exchanged *within* Wapichan society, but they are not traded with outsiders (Validation meeting, Potarinao, 11/05).

Wapichan kaduzu – Wapichan custom

Throughout the South Rupununi our people share a common culture and have similar understandings of biological resources and of our surrounding environment. In all communities the people have a similar way of life, speak the same Wapichan language (though dialects differ), have similar values and beliefs, and understand one another: we all hold and practise what we call *Wapichan kaduzu* “Wapichan custom.”⁶⁰ Individuals, families and communities can thus collaborate effectively in resource use projects and take collective decisions on environmental and land use issues. Cooperation is promoted by our traditional leaders and customary institutions like the *manoru* “collective work party”, which help to bond our people together and sustain our sense of shared identity and common purpose (Figure 1).

Wapichan people believe deeply that they have a responsibility to *karodopan* “care for” the land and its resources in order to maintain abundance for present-day communities and for our future generations, who we call *wa daini nyao ati’i nii* “those coming behind us.” Being a *mishi’o Wapichan* “true Wapichan” is about sharing, participating in collective work, being a good companion, working hard, rising early, and knowing how to relate to people. It is also about knowing how to use land and natural resources “sensibly”. That is why our elders advise *aonaa amazada mapidiankiak mau. Maichapau dain* “you must not use the land foolishly. You must not use without knowing.” This is why it is our custom to consult with an *aichipa’o* “one who knows” about a resource before we use it. It is also advised to talk to the *aichipaotum* “person who knows the place” before using resources in a part of our territory that one is unfamiliar with.

Customary law

A large number of rules in Wapichan society prescribe how different family members, kin, in-laws and neighbours must relate to each other. Several of these social rules relate to correct conduct for using and taking decisions over resources [e.g. Box 3]. There are additional specific customary norms that promote the “sensible” (sustainable) use of land and natural resources (Box 4). These rules are intended to uphold our common property system, prevent social conflicts, avoid spiritual dangers, maintain health and security, enable regeneration of renewable resources and ensure reciprocity and equitable sharing. Norms are upheld through social sanctions, including ostracism from community activities and public chastisement. As well as public condemnation, those who break customary norms risk spiritual punishment from environmental spirits that may cause illness and misfortune. Respect for our cultural norms on proper social behaviour also stems from the widespread and complex belief in supernatural *kanaimo* spirits who bring sickness and death on those who have wronged them.

Beliefs

Our spiritual knowledge is based on our ancestral relationships with plants, animals, medicines and other useful materials on our traditional land. Many customary norms are underpinned by our belief that the whole of our territory is populated by spirit beings. Sites occupied by spirit keepers and other spirits are sensitive and should not be disturbed if it can be avoided. Places such as big lakes, certain mountains, areas with rock engravings, rocky outcrops and some mineral springs are especially sensitive. We tend to avoid these areas that we call *akaa ki kiizai* “dangerous places.” If someone wishes to visit such an area, then ritual precautions must be taken that involve *powan* “blowing” the person. Failure to follow the proper procedures can cause a person to *shokordianni amazada* “offend the spirits in a place.”

Each species or family of animals and plants is believed to have their own spirit *dokozuu* “grandfather” or *tapiki* “keeper.” These keepers watch over their children and oversee their movements and welfare. We believe that the spirit keepers of the animals *wamakarodapa kandon* “feel hurt” when their children are wasted or tormented. This is why we cannot punish, waste or abuse these beings. Any abuse risks upsetting the bush spirits who can bring sickness or misfortune to those responsible. We believe that remedies for spirit-related illnesses brought about by violation of customary law must be provided by a *marunao* “shaman”, who is able to communicate with the grandfather spirits of the savannah, bush and mountains.

⁶⁰ While Wapichan custom is widely shared, this study has documented a rich variety of local knowledge and practices across the South Rupununi – variations derive from family history, individual preferences and local environmental conditions (e.g., soil quality and preferred fallow periods).

Box 4 Some Wapichan customary norms on the sensible (sustainable) use of resources

- + *Kaiwai amazada Kotu'ainao kawan* "Use the land as the ancestors did"
- + *madi waap i tap kuo* "Do not act without reason"
- + *madiwaaitapkao* "do not practice wasteful activities"
- + *Aonaa pu anta miktiana* "Do not ill-treat" (any resource)
- + *mariniya'ataan* "leave off" using a resource or area after use (farming, hunting, fishing)
- + Leave resources in a good state for those generations that "come behind"
- + Follow Wapichan custom (diets, fasting, care of bina, rituals, blessings, thanksgiving)
- + No access to outsiders

Tiwaap "hunting"

- + Do not kill all
- + *Aona puzuyana dusodu kidao wunui* "Do not kill young game animals"
- + *aonaa pu baiya'o naa kaudinii wuni wa kazu ti na naa* "Do not shoot pregnant game"
- + *Ipai wunui aonaa turuu ibaniko* "Do not torment game"
- + Kill only what you need and can consume (hunt only when there is no meat)
- + Do not punish hunting grounds (do not over-hunt)
- + Use different hunting grounds (allow to rest, rotate hunting activity over different areas)
- + Do not shoot the *ikuo* "leader" of a moving group of *bichi* "bush hogs"
- + Share meat equally

Kopauta kiizai "Fishing"

- + Only catch what you can eat and use
- + *mana'a pu wakudana* "You must not waste"
- + Use different pools and different fishing grounds
- + Do not leave fish poison in the creek
- + Do not poison deep pools nor drinking and bathing waters
- + Clean pool of all dead fish after poisoning (leave none)
- + Fish moving upstream to spawn should not be trapped, poisoned or netted
- + Fish traps should be dismantled after use
- + Do not provoke the fish keeper spirits and other water spirits
- + Avoid dangerous pools and rocks
- + Do not wash land turtles in the water
- + Share fish

Zakapu waipzai "Farming"

- + *Aona kaiwunna amazada maipidan kiaka* "Do not use the land foolishly"
- + *Aonaa tiri wa-wakadon amazada* "do not waste the land (Cut only enough for your capacity and needs)"
- + Do not cut farms where there are many trees with edible fruits
- + Extract all useful craft and construction materials before burning
- + Sweep around the field before burning
- + Consult with neighbours before burning
- + Do not punish the land (do not over-exploit, but leave land fallow to rejuvenate)
- + Appeal to tree spirit keepers before felling. Avoid (do not fell) spiritually dangerous trees.

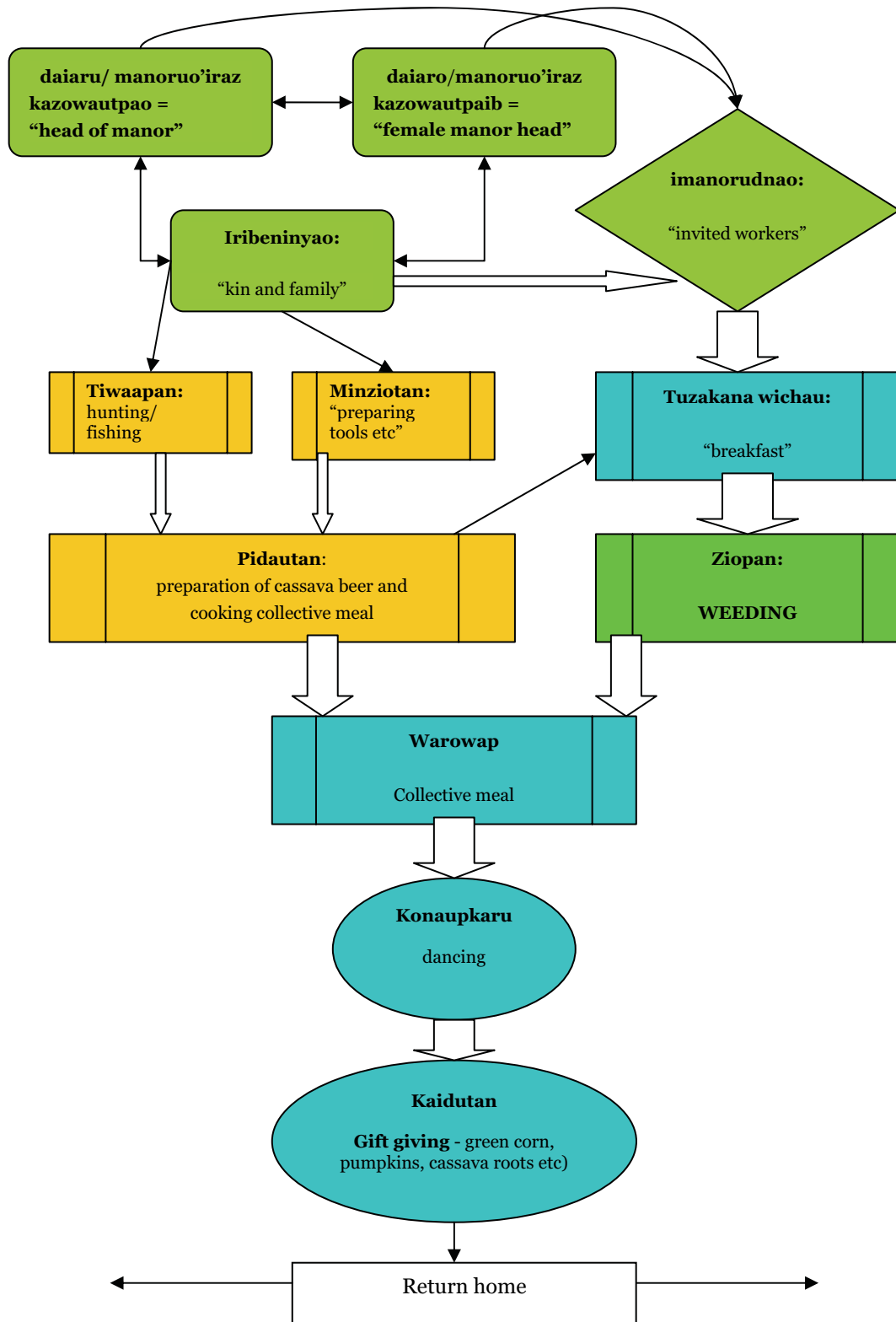
zowaidapkazai "Gathering" (construction, craft, fruits etc)

- + Do not cut all
- + Use only what you need
- + Leave the young shoots (take mature plants)
- + Do not fell bountiful and sweet fruit trees (bitter and low yielding trees may be felled)
- + Do not fell fruit-bearing Ité trees (older, dying and unproductive palms may be felled)
- + Consult with one who knows

Extraction of bush medicines

- + Consult with a *pidan kasaraba'o* "healer" or *aichipa'o* "one who knows"
- + Follow the right blessings and rituals for extraction and use
- + *Manakiiz pu ramtana ipai* "Do not cut-catch all"
- + Take only enough for personal need
- + Ask permission from local owner if medicines are within their farming area
- + Ask permission before collecting medicines in the area of another village
- + Share knowledge and medicines with sick countryman in need of a cure
- + No extraction by outsiders (non-Wapichan) – though sick outsiders can be treated

Figure 1 Organisation of Wapichan Manoru



Learning and practising Wapichan kaduzu

Some Wapichan customs and customary laws are explicit, while others are largely unspoken and learned from childhood as part of growing up in a Wapichan community. A great deal of custom is learnt through daily experience and through practising livelihood and cultural activities. In addition, children are counselled on custom and proper behaviour before dawn as the household starts the day. During these early hours, for example, woman elders use the time spent cotton spinning to pass on traditional knowledge and guidance to girls and young women. Young people also learn certain important rules and codes of conduct through rituals. Young Wapichan hunters must endure fasting and terribly painful rites, including ant stinging and scarification of the hands and body to acquire stamina and hunting skills.⁶¹ Rites include teachings about the correct use of hunting charms, songs, taboos, *sanadian napakar* “dietary restrictions”, the location of spiritually sensitive sites and how to respect game animals.⁶² In the same way, a young man who wishes to become a good fisherman must undergo painful rites and be blessed by elder kinsmen to ensure that his specialist knowledge is used properly and only for fishing in order to *karodopan* “take care of” fishes and their habitats.

Settlement

Decisions about the location of new dwellings or the need to move to new farming grounds are informed by multiple factors. These may include: the quality and abundance of essential resources (soil, water, game, fish etc), Wapichan theories of sickness and death, and social obligations linked to marriage and kinship rules. Settlement decisions are also based on our need for extensive areas for family farming grounds and our cultural preference for scattered occupation of the land whereby our homesteads, farm camps and different family settlements are established some distance apart from one another, thus maintaining a dispersed settlement pattern.

Farming

Heads of farming settlements report that they feel a duty of sensible use and protection towards the natural resources within and adjacent to their home area.⁶³ They advise that according to custom they cut fields to the size that they are able to use effectively. Young farmers are taught that farm fields should be used to their full extent and that they should *mariniya'ataan* “leave off” fields and let them *sookapkidan* “rest” after a few harvests of cassava so the soil is not punished.

Where good soils are found at separate points on the farming ground, these spots are re-used in bush fallow on a rotational basis. This traditional practice of moving from one field to another, before eventually returning back to cultivate an original old field is known as *koora'upan* “to go round and round” or *kiwiampan* “moving to-and-fro.” Where a farming ground becomes infested with pests or where reserves of maiden bush or old fallow become depleted, farmers relocate their farm sections to new areas, leaving the former agricultural area and second bush to recuperate and return to old growth forest.



According to Wapichan beliefs, the *wiizun* tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) [background] is spiritually powerful. It is traditional practice to avoid felling these trees – as done so here in the farming grounds of *Katu'ur* community (11/05)

⁶¹ Hilario Moses, Sawari Wa'o, 02/05

⁶² Henrico Henry, Karaodaz Naawa, 02/05; Community meeting, Achawii, 03/05; Ernest Johnson, Achawii, 03/05; Herman Arthur, Awaru Wa'o Naawa, 03/05; Johnny Indacch, Zoopo Nao, 03/05

⁶³ Valentine Pablo, Marora Naawa, 02/05

Wapichan farmers plant up all available space in their farms and ensure that field size does not exceed the weeding and harvesting capacity of the field owning couple. Elders advise that if farms are felled too big and the land is not used or the crops are left to waste, then Tominkaru “the Creator” will ensure harvests will not be bountiful for that couple the following year.⁶⁴ In addition to this spiritual punishment, as a social sanction farmers assert that they would directly question any farmer they saw felling a field and not putting it to good use (cassava fields, *Katu’ur* community, 11/05)



Hunting

Customary norms on the appropriate use of game resources are not only adhered to by hunters as part of their hunting practice: they are also upheld by the owners of personal hunting lines in the eastern and southern parts of Wapichan territory.⁶⁵ A *kaponaa tin pia’o* “hunting line owner” is recognised as the person who cut a particular line (or his descendant). This person has prior rights over access to his hunting line, as well as a responsibility for sharing its use and for overseeing the proper exploitation of the associated *tiwaapa kiizai* “hunting ground.” Hunting line owners advise that they feel a duty of protection towards the hunting ground along their line, and that in some ways they consider that they “own” the animals there. They hold a conviction that they must *manawupakara* “keep open” and take care of their line for the benefit of children and grandchildren and the wider Wapichan community.⁶⁶ These protective values are passed to the next line owner when they inherit their hunting line e.g.,

When my father knew he was soon going to die, he sat me down one day. He said: “this line is now yours. I am dying. I want you to own this line. Don’t ever forget this line and do not be too stingy when others come to you to ask if they may use it. He also told me: *’puzruuyan diri puwaka dani, aonaa pu antamikitiana. Kaiwe piaipan karanat’* If you kill too many, you will waste. Do not punish it. Only use what you need” [Simon Marcello, Aishara Ton 02/05]

Kaponaa tin pia’o nao emphasise that they keep a watchful eye on who is using their line and try to check on the contents and size of game bags if hunters pass by on their return home. Local line owners thus fulfil a monitoring role as they assess the abundance of game through personal observation and through their knowledge of the rough numbers and kinds of game killed along a line over a certain period of time. If a hunter takes too many animals, line owners explain that they feel “hurt” and will advise the hunter to be more moderate in the future.

In the west, where there are a few individual lines, hunting is mostly centred on particular mixed hunting and fishing areas known as *tapaoraz*, which are reached via community lines. These hunting and fishing areas are associated with local family heads, who live in the vicinity and traditionally watch over and care for the game, fish and other useful resources in their area. These local leaders are sometimes referred to as *pidan tapaoraznao* “people of the hunting and fishing grounds.” Such local leaders advise that they uphold traditional norms of good hunting practice:

⁶⁴ Peter Felix, Aishara Ton, 01/05

⁶⁵ More than 130 named personal and community hunting lines have been documented as part of this case study of traditional practices in Wapichan territory in Guyana.

⁶⁶ Joseph Pernambuco and Wilfred Pauline, Shii, 02/05

Wa Wiizi Wa Kaduzu: Our Territory, Our Custom

There are a lot of *wunui nao* “game animals and fish” in my area ... Our people come here from Sawariwa’o village to hunt and fish. I will advise a visiting hunter of good spots for waiting for deer or laba. When he returns, we divide the meat equally. That is how it is done. There are some activities that I will not allow. I do not allow poisoning of the creeks here. I also advise deer hunters to kill just the males when I know the females are with young. I tell them to hunt for mature deer. I do not take all the hunters or fishermen to the same points, I move it around so that the game is not scared off ... These things are part of our tradition. [Ronald Thomas, Rao Wa’o homestead, Sawariwa’o, 02/05]

The traditional practice of rotating hunting activity over different areas is also applied in the annual community hunts undertaken by each village:

Traditionally our grandfathers sent messengers to neighbouring villages to find out where and when they last used a specific hunting area. If the area intended for hunting had been used recently, they would decide to go elsewhere. This way they used to rotate their hunting grounds. Our village Tshaos still follow this method today when they organise village hunts. [Henrico Henry, Karaodaz Naawa, 03/05]

Table 2 Some examples of personal and community hunting lines used by members of the villages of Shii, Morora Naawa and Karaodaz Naawa (Note: this list is not exhaustive)

Village/Line name	Leads to	Distance/direction	Current Line owner
Shii			
<i>Roomi baoko pona</i>	<i>Roomi baoko</i> lake	16 miles E	Jonah Simon
<i>Kamori wa’o pona</i>	<i>Kamori wa’o</i>	7 miles N	Wilfred Pauline
<i>Kawozaro pona</i>	<i>Kawazarotao</i>	10 miles N	Joseph Pernambuco
<i>Kishish sabao pona</i>	<i>Kishish Sabao</i> Mountain	8 miles NE	Joseph Pernambuco
<i>Peter Shikibaba punaa</i>	<i>Miri wa’o</i>	2 days’ walk N	Bernard Ritchie
<i>Miko wa’o pona</i>	<i>Mikowa’o</i>	5 hours’ walk NE	Gabriel Anton
<i>Dya’utam zowau pona</i>	<i>Karapu’udu</i>	3 days’ walk NE	Community line
<i>Omaba pona</i>	<i>kanoko zokon iti</i>	1 day’s walk NE	Community line
<i>Dyuuwuz wa’o pona</i>	<i>Kwitaro</i>	1 day’s walk NE	Brian Pedro
<i>Mannie pona</i>	<i>Roomi Baoko</i>	1 day’s walk E	Manuel Paul
<i>Tyuya pona</i>	<i>Boon wa’o nom</i>	1 day’s walk E	Dismas Anton
<i>Tokosh wa’o pona</i>	<i>Kwitaro</i>	1 day’s walk E	Harold Peter
<i>Karad Tozoowan pona</i>	<i>Kwitaro</i>	2.5 days’ walk NE	Community line
<i>Turunaru wa’o pona</i>	<i>Kodoidin wa’o</i>	1 day’s walk NE	Justin Opie
Morora Naawa			
<i>wa pona</i>	<i>Koko Kwitaro</i>	1.5 days’ walk SE	Solomon Edward
<i>Zokot wa’o</i>	<i>Kwitaro</i> River	17 miles SE	Moses David
<i>Kazaiman Baoko pona</i>	<i>Rii wa’o-Kwitaro</i>	7 days’ walk E	Bennet James
<i>Chow Chow Baoko pona</i>	<i>Pokorid wa’o</i>	1 day’s walk E	Olaf Claud
<i>kwitaro pona</i>	<i>Kwitaro</i>	2 days’ walk SE	Manoel Louis
Karaodaz Naawa			
<i>Koropu Baoko pona</i>	<i>Korupu Baoko</i>	2 days’ walk S	Community Line
<i>Samunaza wa’o pona</i>	<i>Samunaza wa’o</i>	2 days’ walk S	Community Line
<i>Marasho landing pona</i>	<i>Marasho</i> Landing	2 days’ walk S	Community Line
<i>Chris pona</i>	<i>Tamaruodukuo</i>	2 days’ walk SE	Community Line
<i>Dyaodyaowuz pao pona</i>	<i>Dyaodyaowuz pao</i> landing	4 days’ walk S	Community Line

Fishing

Fishermen emphasise that they value highly their freedom to use different fishing grounds in different parts of our territory, and will make long trips to reach choice fishing spots.⁶⁷ While fishing resources are shared by all Wapichannao, it is traditional practice for different communities to regularly use particular stretches of a river. For example, in the case of the Kwitaro river, the upper catchment is mostly fished by members of Karaodaz and Aishara Ton villages, while people affiliated to Awaru Wa'o Naawa use the middle reaches and Marora Naawa and Shii villages tend to fish mostly on the lower middle and lower reaches of the river.⁶⁸

Our fishing grounds are for all Wapichan. They belong to all of us, whether you come from Suburuin or from Aishara Ton. This is the custom that our grandparents practised. The only thing that our fishermen must remember is that they must follow the rules. For example: catch only what you can use, do not provoke the fish keeper and share your catch. [Valentino Pablo, *Morora Naawa*, 03/05]



Fishing forms part of the daily livelihood activity of most families in the South Rupununi. Commercial fishing is limited, and so most fishing is done for subsistence. Traditional norms stipulate that catches should not exceed the amount necessary for personal need.

The rotational use of fishing grounds is a tradition practised by Wapichan fishermen based on our belief in spirit guardians of the fishes. Fishermen also avoid certain stretches of river and some perennial *baoko* “deep pools” inhabited by *kadorari* “water spirits.”

In terms of poisoning, our ancestors advised that poison should not be used where a pool or pond overflows into a small creek as this is said to “scare” away the fish grandfather spirit and his children, who will not return to the pool. These norms, which intend to protect traditional fisheries, are applied in practice and are being codified in written Village rules (Section 5).

Gathering

For us Wapichan collecting resources in the bush is a deeply meaningful activity. Extraction sometimes involves communication with the spirit owners of these resources.⁶⁹ Conversations with the spirit owners of medicines and charm plants, for example, are accompanied by the ritual use of tobacco in which we *kadakinankii* “appeal” to the spirit and *pishaan* “ask” for permission to take the plant.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mario Louis, Sawari Wa'o, 02/05; Eustace Domingo, Katoonarib, 03/05; Valentine Pablo, Morora Naawa, 03/05

⁶⁸ Validation meeting, Potarinao, 11/05

⁶⁹ Community meeting, Baitoon, 03/05; Christopher Daniel, Parikwarinao, 03/05

⁷⁰ Eugene Wilson, Sawari Wa'o, 02/05; Agnes Bernard, Potarinao, 03/05; Francis Aquilar, Zoopo nao, 03/05;

Wa Wiizi Wa Kaduzu: Our Territory, Our Custom

According to our tradition, Wapichan people aim to take care of useful resources near our settlements and farm camps so we do not have to walk far to find things we need. It is common for craftsmen and women and traditional builders to have favoured personal resource sites in bush areas within or near their farming grounds, as well as other gathering grounds shared with the wider community in more distant parts of the territory (Section 3).

Traditional practices that aim to promote sustainable use include partial and selective cutting, rotational harvest, careful extraction and exclusive use of bountiful sites for gathering activities only. As a rule, those collecting craft and construction resources only cut the mature materials that are ready for use and leave young plants or trees to grow on for future use by our communities. According to our beliefs timber and craft resources should be extracted during those times of the month when there are dark nights. We believe that materials gathered at other times will suffer attacks from weevils and termites and so will not last long.

Wherever possible it is our custom to harvest fruits or other materials without felling the tree. Fruit is traditionally harvested by climbing the trees, building a platform or using a gaff to bring down fruit. When cutting timber trees, we take care to ensure that they fall without damaging younger timber trees growing nearby. In the same way, trees that provide other useful material like medicines are only used in certain ways to protect the tree for future use. Another tradition is to protect areas with a local abundance of craft, medicinal or construction materials that are scarce elsewhere. The existence of these traditional reserves is most common in the western savannah region of our territory where forest is confined to bush islands and mountainous areas.⁷¹

Evolving customs and practices

As our main villages have become more permanent over the last half century, it has become customary to consolidate and extend traditional practices that aim to maintain long-term supplies of resources near the settlement. A prime example of such sustainable use practice is the selective cutting of Ité palm leaves (*Mauritia flexuosa*) to maintain the supply near the village or homestead for thatch and craft work. Careful extraction involves the cutting of mature leaves, while young shoots are left to grow for future harvest. This selective cutting of Ité leaves is practised by individuals and by communities throughout our territory and is being incorporated into written village rules in most communities (Section 5).



Selective harvesting of *dywuza anaba* “Ité palm leaves” for thatch. Young shoots are left to grow on for future use and trees are ready for harvest again after 12 months or more.

⁷¹ Martin Caitan, Sawari Wa’o, 02/05

5 Management of Territory and Sustainable Use

Section 4 has summarised how Wapichan people in Guyana hold ancestral lands collectively under our systems of traditional governance, land tenure, decision-making and customary law, which together have enabled our people to equitably use and care for the biological and natural resources within our traditional territory since the time of our ancestors. As noted in Section 2, our institutions and traditional practices are not static, but rather flexible and responsive to changing environmental and historical conditions. In recent years, our people have integrated new community and inter-community decision-making bodies into our system for governing our communities and caring for our territory. Our system of traditional monitoring and customary regulation of resource use, for example, is today coordinated with our Village Councils and District Toshias Councils (See, for example, foot of Box 3, Section 4).

There is now a structure of decision-making that includes traditional leaders and elected Village Councils and District Toshias Councils, which functions to manage our collective affairs. This structure operates from the level of the local settlement group, to the central village and up to the District [Figure 1]. Communication and coordination between distant Wapichan communities are facilitated on a daily basis by the use of two-way radios, and by quarterly face-to-face meetings of the District Toshias Councils (see below) as well as regular meetings between neighbouring Toshias on matters that arise in-between quarterly meetings.

Village Councils and the office of Toshao

Since the 1950s, our larger villages have elected their own Village Councils, which have become an integral part of community governance and collective decision-making. These Councils were given powers by the British to make rules and regulations, hold public meetings and levy fines for non-compliance with Council regulations.⁷² After independence, the revision of the 1951 Amerindian Act legally empowered Village Councils to take collective decisions over the regulation and management of resources within titled village lands. Several village councillors and one community spokesperson and leader, known as the Toshao (also known as Village Captain), are elected every two years. Most villages have chosen to give each Councillor responsibility to focus on a particular aspect or several aspects of community affairs, such as agriculture, education or health. In some of Wapichan villages, Councils have established community groups to mobilise different “sections” of the community to deal with issues such as women’s affairs and land rights issues.

Throughout this study, villagers in all settlements emphasised that the Toshao must not and cannot take decisions alone about the use of resources within our collective territory. In accordance with customary and national laws, statutory public meetings are held to ratify community endorsement or rejection of proposed decisions. Toshias normally respect customary processes for decision-making, by undertaking traditional consultations with elders and family heads in the early morning, sometimes long before daybreak, prior to discussing an issue in statutory meetings. In this way, community consensus is achieved before formal decisions are taken. Traditional consultation practices are essential for the effective organisation of community work activities that involve community labour and use of community resources (Figure 2). However, this study has found that in dealings with external agencies, such prior consultation has is not always forthcoming and so collective decisions taken under the 51% majority voting rule in public meetings, sometimes fail to adequately capture valid expressions of community consensus. For this reason, one recommendation of this study – endorsed by all community Toshias and elders who took part in the validation of this report – is that formal rules for community decision-making need further revision and amendment (Section 7).

⁷² Although elected village councils were not introduced to the Rupununi until the 1950s, the office of Toshao or village “Captain” has a much longer history. During the early colonial period, the office of “owl” was created by the Dutch for Amerindian leaders who were appointed to act as go-betweens between the colonial authorities and indigenous peoples (Whitehead 1988:169). When Guyana came under British rule in the early 19th century, the office of owl was renamed as “Captain” and the duties of this office-holder were expanded. For example, Captains were given the powers of rural constables with authority to arrest and detain criminals. Our elders advise that the first Captain in Wapishana territory to be appointed by the British – in the early 1900s – was Leonard Johnson, a leader of the village of Piraznao (Ernest Johnson, Achawii, 03/05).

Figure 2: Wapichan Decision-making: organising a community construction project using local lumber (decision to construct to cutting timber stage)

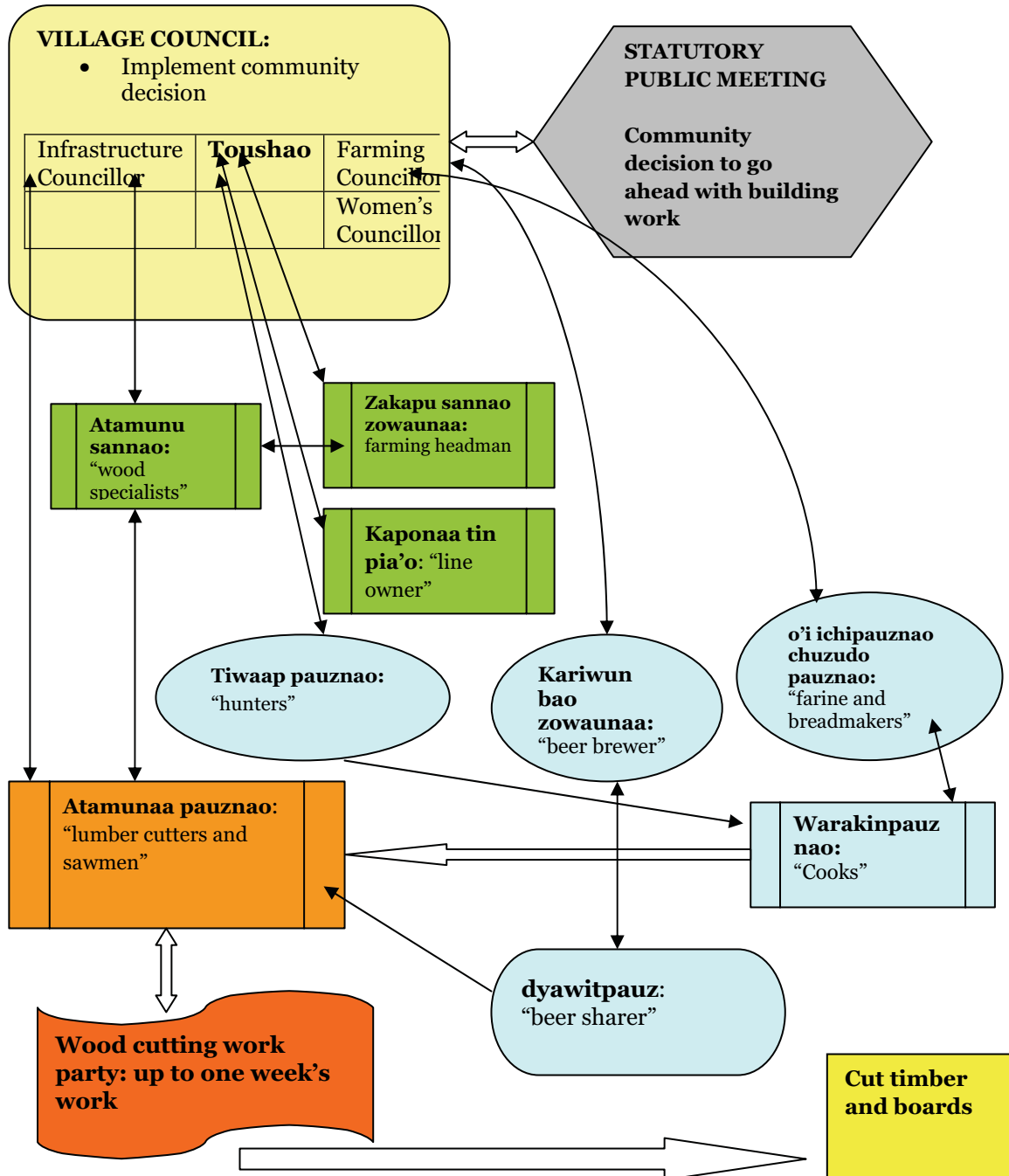
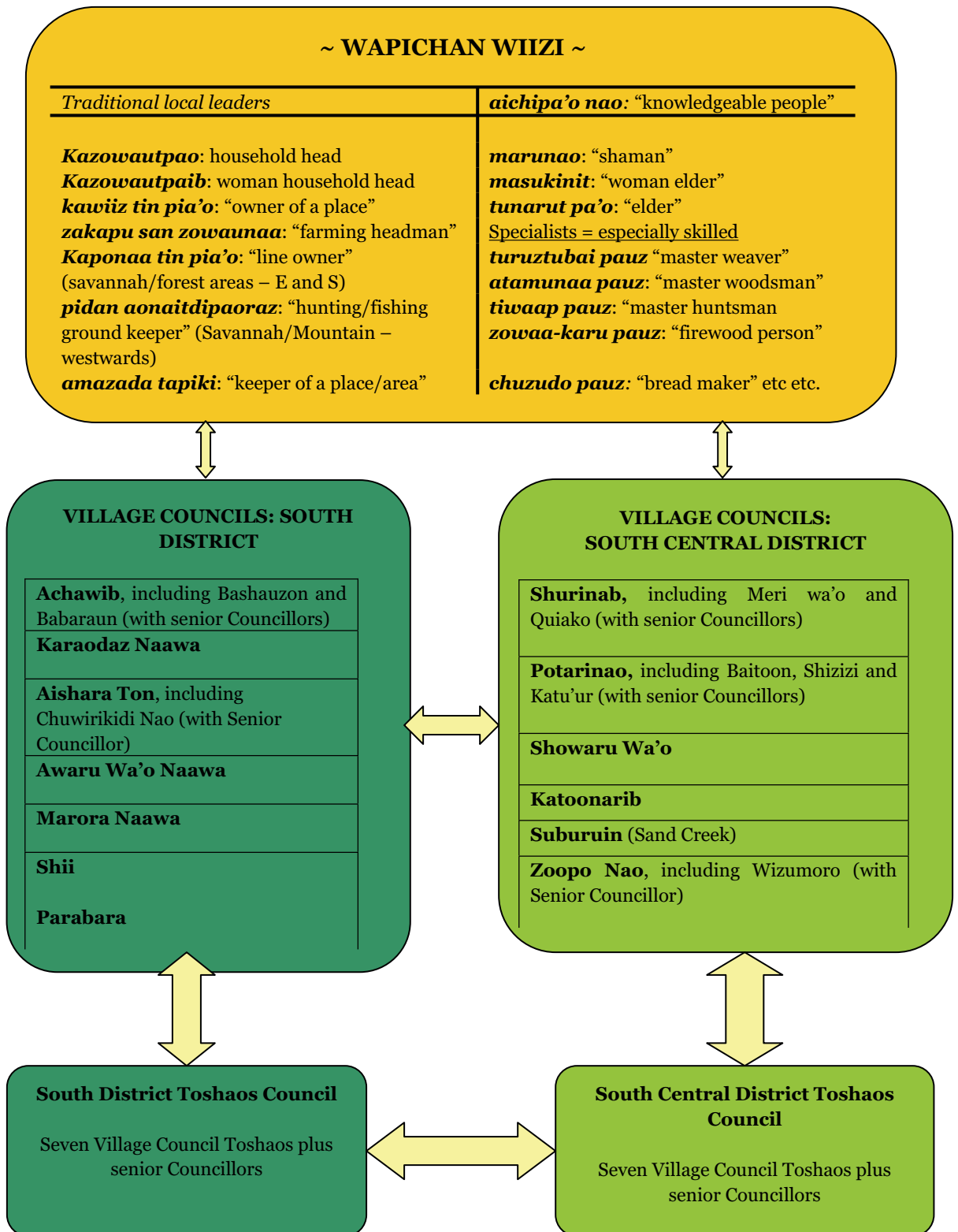


Figure 3 Governance and Decision-making structures operating in Wapichan Territory in the Southern Rupununi



District Toshaos Councils

In January of 2002, the villages of Shii, Morora Naawa, Awaru Wa'o Naawa, Aishara Ton, Karaodaz Naawa, Achawib and Parabara formed their own South District Toshaos Council. In August of the same year, the villages of Shurinab, Potarinao, Sawari Wa'o, Katoonarib, Zoopo Nao and Parikwarinao formed the South Central District Toshaos Council. Each District Council is made up of the Toshaos and one senior councillor from each main village and meets every quarter on a rotation basis to discuss local, inter-community and territory-wide issues. The mandate of the District Toshaos Councils (DTCs) is to formulate and implement inter-community policies and promote coordination in economic and development activities. Crucially, communities have entrusted their Toshaos Councils to uphold traditional jurisdiction over untitled areas, to govern and manage our traditional territory and to continue the collective struggle for legal recognition of our ancestral lands for present and future generations.⁷³

Consolidating traditional practices and developing environmental rules

Village Councils and DTCs are codifying customary law on sustainable resource use in written rules and policies.⁷⁴ Our leaders are careful to ensure that writing customary laws into village rules is based on collective consensus and traditional decision-making processes, in order to make sure that rules are adapted to community priorities and to local circumstances. Our Village Councils are also collectively agreeing on new rules and collective action to tackle emerging resource issues in our communities (Box 5). For example, some villages have agreed and adopted rules to promote safe and sustainable burning of the savannah in accordance with traditional practices (see below). Other rules have been adopted to strictly protect fish stocks and livestock from destructive fish poisoning. There is also now a growing consensus that fishing with seine nets should be tackled by new village rules, which should be backed up by inter-community rules agreed by our District Toshaos Councils.

Creation of reserve areas

Given the relative scarcity of farming bush and the limited availability of construction and craft materials in savannah areas, several Village Councils in the western portion of Wapichan territory have recently agreed to set aside reserves for craft and construction materials and for farmland.

We have agreed to reserve bush islands and portions of bush islands where no new farms will be allowed without community permission. These areas include *Warawaiton*, *Wazton*, *Ichibaiton* and the upper slopes of *Torudukuo* Mountain ... As our population grows the majority of our people realise that we have to adopt new agreements. [Jerome Marques, Toshao, Sawari Wa'o, 02/05]



Savannah villages like Sawari Wa'o have taken collective decisions to set aside all or part of specific bush islands like Warawaiton, above, for community timber, craft and construction reserves

⁷³ E.g., Community meeting, Morora Naawa, 02/05; Community meeting Zoopo Nao, 03/05; Community meeting Shurinab, 04/05; Validation meeting, Potarinao, 11/05

⁷⁴ Some Village Councils are also engaged in active promotion of traditional practices through support for community initiatives to teach bush crafts to young people and support for traditional activities such as cotton spinning and weaving in community sporting events.

Box 5 Examples of Village Council Rules and Regulations on Resource Use

Written rules

- + No burning of farm fields until all useful materials (timber, basket-making vines and plants etc) have been extracted
- + Community members are obliged to advise the Village Council if they have useful materials in their new farm awaiting burning that they cannot use or transport
- + Cut timber and construction materials must not be left to waste in the forest. Anything cut must be transported and put to effective personal or community use
- + Ité palms must not be felled inside or near the village, and felling should be restricted to areas outside the village and then only to a limited number of old and un-useful Ité trees that may be felled for “farming” palm grubs
- + Fruit trees in the village used by children and the public must not be felled without prior agreement by the Village Council
- + Sand and brick-clay extraction is not permitted within the village boundaries (to prevent siltation of useful bathing and fishing streams and pools)
- + Outside contractors mining building sand and gravel must obtain prior permission from the village Council and pay a levy to the Council on loads removed from the village territory
- + Fish poisoning is expressly forbidden within the village boundaries and surrounds without the prior permission if the Village Council.
- + No poisoning of creeks in the sources of watercourse used for bathing, drinking downstream
- + Anyone who is granted permission to poison a creek must (a) use all the catch without waste (b) ensure that the poisoned pool or creek is properly fenced against livestock.
- + No burning of the savannah without prior permission of the Village Council
- + Use of an area for livestock grazing must be approved by the community and be ratified by the Village Council
- + Families using savannah areas for cattle grazing must not treat it as their own farming ground, but still allow access to other community members for hunting, fishing and gathering of resources
- + Fish poisoning is never allowed in certain pools and creeks e.g., *Kiibanbao* pool near Aishara Ton and *Arimaraka baoko* near Karaodaz Naawa

Unwritten rules

- + People wishing to collect *ochoro* (*O. bataua*) palm fruits within a family’s farming and hunting grounds should ask the resident family for prior permission.
- + Poison must not be used in creeks that can be easily fished with throw nets
- + No poisoning in creeks and streams used by livestock
- + Timber is only to be cut for community use, and not for sale to outsiders.
- + High forest rich in *ochoro* palms will not be felled for farms, but retained for community gathering of forest fruits
- + High forest abundant in valuable timber species will be out of bounds to farming (timber reserve)
- + New farm fields must be swept around before burning to prevent any spread of fire
- + Savannah areas must not to be set alight without a clear purpose
- + If you extract resources, use all the material (Do not over-harvest. Do not waste timber)

Sanctions

Traditional sanctions: ridicule, ostracism, verbal chastisement in public

Offence reported to Toshao and Village Council

Meeting with Toshao: request for explanation and verbal caution and strict warning

Called before all the Village Council to explain actions

Required to give time and labour to village work

Money fines (rarely used)

Sanctions

If rules on resource use are broken, the existing customary sanctions of community disapproval noted in Section 4 coupled with a warning from the Toshao are usually sufficient to correct unacceptable behaviour. All communities stress that in practice the rules based on customary norms are only very rarely – if ever – broken, due to the continuing vitality of our traditional social values, culture and belief system. New village rules to regulate non-traditional technologies and practices, however, are not always implemented. Developing mechanisms and agreements to improve the practical application of village rules to regulate introduced methods of resource use has thus been identified as a priority by most communities that took part in this study.

Inter-community coordination

Our communities have resolved to further strengthen our institutions and our organisation for joint decision-making on land management and development issues at a territorial level. District Toshias Councils have already begun to develop advice and take decisions on resource matters that affect several villages and minor settlements. For example, South District Toshias Council has started to discuss management and use of communal fishing grounds on the Kuyuwini, Kwitaro and Rupununi Rivers.⁷⁵ Both DTCs are now planning to meet together to discuss issues and collective initiatives that will affect the use and management of land and resources across the whole territory (see below).

Sustainability of resource use

Elders and other community members hold a deep conviction that our traditional resource use is sustainable. They point out that forests are intact and healthy, and game is still generally abundant after generations of occupation and use, although in some cases game and construction resources have become locally less abundant around some of our larger central villages. Wapichan farmers who took part in this study stress that our traditional farming practices are sustainable because they involve manual labour, small-scale technology, natural fertilisers and ample fallow periods that are sustained through traditional access to extensive farming grounds. They observe that areas used for farming for generations have retained their forest cover in the south and east of our territory. They also point out that crop yields have not declined. In the west, farmers report that forest cover is more or less stable, although most old growth forest in bush islands on the savannah has been replaced by second bush (secondary forest). These local observations of stable forest cover are backed up by previous scientific studies in the region.⁷⁶

One aspect of raising cattle that has been pinpointed as an issue of concern among communities involved in this study is the use of burning to manage pastures for grazing. Fire is part of the natural savannah ecosystem and helps maintain its special vegetation. It is traditional practice to use fire to maintain roads and pathways, clear brush around the home and to flush out game (Section 3). The normal time for burning is just after the rains at the start of the dry season, when it is customary to burn fire breaks around valuable farming grounds and groves of useful plants on the savannah-forest edge to protect them from uncontrolled or accidental fires later in the dry season. During very dry summers, fires occasionally can (and sometimes do) get out of control. To combat this, Village Councils are seeking to strictly regulate burning (Box 5). They are also applying traditional management practices, including the use of fire breaks to protect Ité palm groves and bush islands.⁷⁷

Wapichan hunters report that over the years certain favoured species like the armadillo and savannah deer have become locally less abundant nearer to larger permanent settlements. At the same time, possibly due to the growing number of families that rely on meat from domestic livestock, hunters report local increases in populations of laba, agouti and bush hog. In some areas, these animals are so numerous that they have become a nuisance for farmers who suffer crop damage. There is so far no evidence to suggest that non-traditional techniques such as night hunting are threatening game populations. Existing concerns relate more to illegal hunters who invade Wapichan territory from Brazil (see below).

In relation to fishing, non-traditional technologies like the cast net and long line have been effectively incorporated into a range of sustainable fishing practices alongside traditional techniques. In contrast, some people interviewed as part of this research expressed concern over the growing use of seine nets, dive fishing and spear guns by some fishermen, which they fear may “scare away” the fish and their spirit keepers. There is also a general impression that fish stocks in some larger rivers are in decline.

⁷⁵ Tony James, Aishara Ton, 05/05

⁷⁶ See Eden, M J (1986) “Monitoring Indigenous Shifting Cultivation in Forest Areas in Southwest Guyana using Aerial Photography and LANDSAT” pp. 255-278 in Eden, M J and Parry J T (Eds) (1986) *Remote Sensing and Tropical Land Management* John Wiley and Sons, London at 257,265 and 268.

⁷⁷ Vivien Isaacs, Katu’ur, 11/05

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Even though the precise reasons for apparent reductions in the abundance of fish are not known and may be wholly or partly linked to damaging fishing practices carried out by other people downriver and outside the Rupununi, community members are taking a precautionary approach by calling on their Village Councils and Regional Toshias Councils to regulate new fishing methods in the Rupununi – a call that is already being acted upon as noted above.

This study therefore finds that internal resource problems in our communities are mainly limited in scale and locally isolated. The communities in the South Rupununi that participated in this study stress that the most serious threats to the integrity of their sustainable traditional resource management regime stem from a range of external commercial interests and official government policies (Section 6).

Facing external threats

The expanding cattle ranching frontier in Brazil now reaches right up to the Takatu River and has brought with it increasing pressures on the western part of Wapichan territory. Brazilians regularly cross over the border to undertake illicit hunting, cattle rustling and mining. Community members and Toshias that have challenged these intruders have been threatened.

Ranchers come across the border to hunt deer and take our cattle. They come with powerful repeating weapons and fast vehicles. These people are heavily armed and the Village Councils and local leaders can do little to stop them. This is a problem all along the western border of our territory. We need to be equipped properly to monitor this area and we need greater recognition of our role by the government so that we can safely challenge these intruders. [Vivien Isaacs, Katu'ur, 11/05]

In the northern part of Wapichan territory, traditional lands around Parikwarinao have already suffered occasional invasion by Guyanese and Brazilian logging interests. Though timber concessions are currently unoccupied in our territory, there are no guarantees from the Government of Guyana that these will not be occupied in the future and that further concessions will not be sold above our heads and against the wishes of our communities. The mining industry is also gaining a foothold in our territory. The Canadian Corporate Vanessa Venture Ltd has obtained a gold mining concession on lands around Marudi Mountain that lie within our territory and our land claim. As with logging, there are no assurances that the Guyanese authorities will not issue more exploratory permits or mining concessions on our lands (Section 6).

There are further growing threats to our traditional land use system from international road and infrastructure projects. The Georgetown to Lethem road and new bridge over the Takatu near Lethem have brought growing threats of an influx of coastlanders and commercial interests into the region⁷⁸. Recent news confirms that road links between Brazil and Guyana are to be consolidated with plans for a new deep water port in Georgetown. If these plans go ahead, it is possible that the remote South Rupununi region will become more attractive to logging and mining companies whose activities will intensify pressures on our environment and threaten our way of life.

Even government and international NGO conservation policies threaten to affect our traditional resource use practice. The State now plans to establish with funds from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) a protected area in the Kanuku mountains.⁷⁹ The proposed boundaries of this area and how it may affect our customary resource use are still not clear. At this stage, however, we have concerns about GPAS options to impose involuntary restrictions on existing resource use, and indications that the proposed park may overlap our longstanding unresolved land claim (Section 2).

Tourism is another issue that is now a concern as more and more tourists come to the Rupununi each year to fish in Rii Wa'o and visit other remote forest areas. Village Councils increasingly see the need to increase regulation of this activity within our lands.

⁷⁸ La Rose, M (2006) "Brazil businessmen willing to pave Georgetown to Lethem road" Stabroek News, 30th April, 2006

⁷⁹ GEF Project Document for a Proposed Grant of US\$6.0 million to the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for the Guyana Protected Areas System Project, Global Environment Facility: Washington DC, April 2005 Available at: http://www.gefweb.org/Documents/Project_Proposals_for_Endorsement/Guyana__Protected_Areas_Ph_1.pdf

Pressing need for secure and adequate land title

The long-term security, viability and sustainability of our customary resource use and associated traditional practices are threatened by inadequate government frameworks for land demarcation and titling. As noted in Section 2, more than half our major and minor settlements and a large part of our customary farmlands, hunting, fishing gathering grounds lack the protection of legal land title. Our communities are unhappy about this lack of land security. They stress that they have inherent rights to their lands as they inherited them from their forefathers and that a secure land base sustains the Wapichan way of life:

We need all of our lands: the forest, the savannah, the mountains and the bush islands. We need all this land to live according to our traditions. Without our lands our children could no longer live like our *dokozinao* “grandfathers” [Gordon Francis, Katoonarib, 03/05]

Our leaders also point out that the current land titles are too small to provide an adequate land base to enable our people to practise our sustainable traditional livelihood:

The present land titles are too small. Our population is increasing year after year. We need the government to recognise title over all our traditional and communal land. [Justin Isaacs, Shizizi, 03/05]

A problem we face is that our farmlands within titled land are becoming exhausted. In many farming areas, all that is left is secondary bush. Without expensive chemicals, the farming in one small place is not possible. Yields decline and weeds take over ... To continue sustainable farming according to custom, all of the communities’ traditional lands must be titled. [Patrick Gomes, Toshao, Morora Naawa, 02/05]

Both District Toshao Councils are closely involved in coordinating the land claim of Wapichan and Macushi communities. Given the growing external threats to our traditional lands, our leaders recognise the need to continue to press the government to resolve our long-standing land claim to the full extent of our territory. Our leaders are calling on the government to legally recognise all of the areas we customary use to protect our way of life, maintain our livelihoods and safeguard associated traditional practices.

Community maps and natural resource management plans

Our institutions and communities have started working together on mapping and environmental planning initiatives in an effort to secure the full extent of our traditional lands and to further promote the sustainable use and conservation of biological resources in our territory. Community maps of traditional occupation and resource use have already been produced for the South District and South Central District and are in the process of being validated by our communities. There are proposals to formulate our own natural resource management plans for each community and integrate these into a territorial management plan that will cover the whole of *Wapichan wiizi* in Guyana. These management plans will build on community maps of our traditional land use and will draw on the findings of this community study of customary use and traditional practices.

The communities in the South and South Central now propose to draw up management plans for all of the lands they occupy and customarily use. We hope these plans can assist the communities to address resource issues and challenges, plan for community development and protect our traditional system of using resources that is spread out over near and distant areas of land, forests, waters and savannahs. [Patrick Gomes, Toshao, Morora Naawa, 05/05]

All of our communities plan to compile management plans for each village and territory for the extraction of craft materials, for hunting and fishing, for livestock rearing, small-scale mining, tourism and other activities. We will do this in a collaborative way with our elders and knowledgeable people in the community. We will also need technical support and help from others to assist us in developing these plans. [Eugene Andrew, Toshao, Suburuin, 02/05]

Section 6 that follows makes a summary assessment of the key opportunities and remaining policy and legal obstacles to effective recognition and protection of our territory and our customary use of biological resources.

6 Legal Framework and National Policies

This section summarises and evaluates national policies and laws pertaining to or affecting the exercise of indigenous peoples' laws and self-government regimes, land and resource ownership and management, and cultural heritage ownership to see to what extent they give effect to article 10(c).⁸⁰

CBD guidance on article 10(c)

In relation to article 10(c), the CBD's Ecosystem Approach (Principle 1), *Addis Ababa Principles and Guidelines for the Sustainable Use of Biodiversity* (Principles 1 and 2), and CBD sustainable use principles in general require security of tenure over traditionally owned terrestrial, aquatic and marine estates, including the resources therein, and recognition and protection for customary law systems and institutions as they relate to land and resource tenure and management (Section 1). The Addis Ababa Principles further recognize that protection of tenure and/or stewardship rights 'greatly enhances' sustainability. The CBD Secretariat has also acknowledged that to obtain adequate protection of their traditional knowledge and practices, holders of traditional knowledge will need to "feel secure in tenure arrangements regarding their traditional land, forest and marine/inland water estates".⁸¹ Article 10(c) should thus be understood to require protection for indigenous peoples' customary land base and resources, and the ecosystem and environment in which those lands and resources are found and customarily used. It also requires incentive and other measures by states to encourage the continuance of sustainable customary use of biological resources.

National policies

Guyana's National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) adopted in 1994 states that "...the Government of Guyana will endeavor, *inter alia*: to involve the population, including indigenous peoples, women and youth, in the management of the environment and natural resources". The 1997 National Forest Policy acknowledges the right of indigenous peoples to ownership of forest resources on titled lands, but not over untitled traditional lands. The forest policy fails to acknowledge that indigenous peoples have customary management systems pertaining to forests. While the 1999 National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) notes that biodiversity plays an important role in the belief and therapeutic systems of indigenous peoples, it makes no reference to article 10(c) and does not recognise the contribution of indigenous peoples to the maintenance of biological resources and biodiversity through their traditional practices and customary use of these resources. Instead, the NBAP tends to see indigenous peoples as a potential threat to biodiversity and even calls for a review of the protections for traditional resource rights under existing legislation.

Laws of Guyana

Guyanese law, since the earliest days of colonization by Europeans has included measures intended to protect the traditional rights of indigenous peoples. These savings clauses guaranteeing the exercise of traditional usufruct rights and privileges are still present in existing legislation (Box 6). In addition, as amended in 2003, the Constitution of Guyana provides important protections for the cultural heritage and ways of life of indigenous peoples (Box 6). These new protections have yet to be tested or interpreted however, and long-standing protections for traditional rights have not always been upheld in practice and have been systematically contracted over the centuries (see for example the discussion on the Company Fence in the Rupununi Section 2 above).

Notwithstanding existing protections for traditional usufruct rights, the land regularisation system of Guyana under existing laws is not based upon recognition of indigenous peoples' rights and there are no transparent and objective criteria to determine which indigenous lands should be recognised and titled. Instead, the law enshrines an arbitrary process for land titling based on the government's discretion. In many parts of Guyana, including the South Rupununi, indigenous peoples do not have legal title to a meaningful area of their traditional lands and many communities have no title at all (Sections 2 and 5).

⁸⁰ The summary here is drawn from a much more extensive legal analysis prepared as part of the project: James, D (2006) *Article 10(c) and the Laws of Guyana* Unpublished report

⁸¹ *Traditional Knowledge and Biological Diversity*, UNEP/CBD/TKBD/1/2, 18 October 1997 at 9.

Box 6 Article 10(c) and the Laws of Guyana

Constitution (as amended in 2003)

The Constitution of Guyana provides in Article 149G that “**Indigenous peoples have the right to protection, preservation and promulgation of their languages, cultural heritage and way of life.**” The preamble adds that the Guyanese people “value the special place in our nation of the Indigenous Peoples and recognise their right as citizens to land and security and to the promulgation of policies for their communities.”

Amerindian Act 1951 (as amended 1976 and repealed on 17 February 2006)

Land titles issued under the Act are vested in Village Councils, which hold title for the “benefit and use” of the community members and have powers to manage and regulate this land. This limited decision making and management authority does not extend to (often large areas of) lands and resources traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used beyond the bounds of titled areas or to rivers and other bodies of water within titled areas. Section 20A(4) of the Act provides the Minister with extreme powers to nullify indigenous titles and expropriate their lands for reasons of “public interest”. Section 20A(2) exempts rivers and river banks up to 66 feet inland; minerals or the right to mine; landing strips or future landing strips, and pre-1976, state-owned buildings and land upon which they are situated from inclusion in indigenous land titles. The Act does provide for a limited form of self government, but indigenous autonomy and authority is curtailed as various sections of the legislation allow the government to veto the establishment of a village Council, to appoint any person its wishes to the Council and revoke appointments without cause. The Minister must also approve any internal rules adopted by Village Councils and may revoke any enacted rule at any time and for any reason.

Mining Act 1989

The government has wide ranging powers under Section 4 whereby it may constitute any portion of Guyana as a Mining District by publishing a notice in the Gazette or one newspaper. This executive authority has been exercised before, when part of the traditional lands of the Akawaio people, was declared a mining district (Region 7). The Act contains one important safeguard for indigenous peoples’ rights: Section 112 provides that “all land occupied and used by Amerindian communities and all land necessary for the quiet enjoyment by the Amerindians of any Amerindian settlement, shall be deemed to be lawfully occupied and used by them”.

Forests Act

Under the Act the government has the power to “declare by order any area of State land to be a state forest reserve and to vary or revoke such order.” The Guyana Forestry Commission may issue areas as concessions for commercial logging purposes in any state forest reserve. The Act provides for protection of traditional indigenous rights and privileges in section 39, which states that “nothing in this Act shall be construed to prejudice, alter or affect any right or privilege heretofore legally possessed, exercised or enjoyed by any Amerindian in Guyana.” In effect this provision makes it lawful for indigenous people to continue their traditional practices such as hunting, fishing and forest gathering in State Forests. However, under the same act the government has discretionary power to make regulations defining the privileges and rights enjoyed by indigenous peoples in relation to the State forests (though not exercised to date).

Environmental Protection Act 1996

Cumbersome *Environmental Protection (Wildlife Management and Conservation) Regulations* of 2000 adopted under the Act impose a number of restrictions on the use of wildlife, some of them severe, which affect indigenous peoples’ subsistence and other rights. Pursuant to Regulation 27, the Minister may on an *ad hoc* basis exempt “any Amerindian or group of Amerindians” from the regulations as they relate to harvesting wildlife or keeping animals in captivity, subject to the “implied condition” that use of wildlife may only be for subsistence, medicinal or other such purposes as the Minister may specify.

State Lands Act 1962

This law regulates all lands in Guyana except privately held lands (including indigenous titled lands) and lands declared to be State Forests. The legislation maintains the legal fiction that the state acquired ownership of all untitled lands as a successor to the Dutch and British colonial powers and as such indigenous peoples are not recognised as possessing inherent rights to their traditionally owned lands, territories and resources – rights that arise from and are grounded in customary laws and associated land tenure systems. Section 41 provides that “[n]othing in this Act shall be construed to prejudice, alter, or affect any right or privilege heretofore legally possessed, exercised, or enjoyed by any Amerindian in Guyana...,” subject to regulations defining these rights or privileges. Regulations, however, substantially limit Amerindian ‘rights and privileges e.g., Regulation 9(1) provides that any Amerindian who wants to cut timber or dig, remove or carry away any item from State lands will have to apply for permission, which can be denied.

Land titles issued by the government in 1976, 1991 and 2004 are not based on indigenous peoples' customary tenure and traditional resource use systems and fail to recognise the jurisdiction of indigenous authorities over the full extent of their traditional lands. Many indigenous communities, again including a significant number in the South Rupununi, have customary settlements, farmlands and other resource areas outside their titled areas, while aquatic habitats and resources within their titled areas continue to be classified as state property beyond the legal jurisdiction of Village Councils. In this way, indigenous territories in Guyana have been broken up into (often small) islands of titled lands intersected by State Lands. Additionally, until February 2006, the titles contained in-built mechanisms allowing for expropriation in numerous ways (Box 6) and at present expropriation may still take place in the public interest and without indigenous peoples' consent. The question of rights to land and the legal recognition by means of title therefore remains the single major unresolved issue affecting indigenous peoples. The government of Guyana meanwhile has given out much of Guyana's resource-rich interior to foreign and local mining and forestry interests. Many of these concessions lie in close proximity to titled indigenous lands or include untitled lands which indigenous peoples have traditionally owned or otherwise used or occupied.

The newly enacted Amerindian Act of February 2006 does little to remedy the aforementioned faults with Guyana's existing legal framework and in some ways exacerbates some of the problems and creates additional obstacles for the implementation of article 10(c) not previously encountered (Box 7). For example, the new Act removes the legal right for several Amerindian villages to jointly hold title, and requires communities to apply for and hold land titles individually.

Box 7 The Amerindian Act 2006

The Amerindian Act 2006 will most likely be the primary legislation in Guyana affecting indigenous peoples' rights and issues for the coming decades. This law is very problematic on a number of counts and has even introduced new obstacles to the effective implementation of article 10(c) because it, *inter alia*:

- Retains the legal fiction that all untitled lands are held by the State
- Fails to recognise indigenous peoples' inherent rights to their lands, territories and resources
- Retains an arbitrary process for land demarcation and titling
- Fails to require that titling be based on customary land tenure systems or customary laws pertaining to land and resource ownership - contrary to international law⁸²
- Vests title to land and resources only in individual villages rather than in a District Toshaos Council or some other entity that could hold title on behalf of a number of villages jointly
- Still excludes all creeks and rivers and other water bodies from indigenous title
- Lacks effective protections for the land and resource rights of the many indigenous communities in Guyana who still lack legal title to their traditional lands
- Imposes unjust eligibility requirements on indigenous communities wishing to apply for land title
- Allows mining and logging concessions to be issued over untitled traditional lands without prior consultation and consent, or in the case of logging without notification
- Allows the State to expropriate traditional lands for the establishment of protected areas without due process, free, prior and informed consent or compensation – contrary to CBD Decision VII/23 on protected areas
- Invests the government with arbitrary powers to interfere in the functioning and decision-making of indigenous peoples' governing bodies
- Subjects traditional rights of indigenous peoples over State Lands and State Forests to the rights of leaseholders and others, whereas the opposite was the case under prior law

⁸² See, among others, Judgment of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of The Mayagna (Sumo) Indigenous Community of Awas Tingni v. the Republic of Nicaragua, 31 August 2001, *Inter-Am. Court on Human Rights, Series C, No. 79* (2001), at para. 149, 151; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report No 75/02*, Case No 11.140, Mary and Carrie Dann (United States), Dec. 27, 2002. OEA/Ser.L/V/II.116, Doc. 46, at para. 131; and *Report No. 40/04*, Case 12.053, Maya Indigenous Communities of the Toledo District (Belize), 12 October 2004, at para. 117:

... the jurisprudence of the (inter-American human rights) system has acknowledged that the property rights of indigenous peoples are not defined exclusively by entitlements within a state's formal legal regime, but also include that indigenous communal property that arises from and is grounded in indigenous custom and tradition.

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Confining cognizable property rights to individual communities contradicts traditional indigenous land tenure systems, which vest paramount ownership (territorial) rights in indigenous peoples as a whole and subsidiary (land) rights in sub-entities, such as villages and farming settlement groups (Section 4). It also undermines traditional resource management systems and associated traditional knowledge, both of which are integral to maintaining subsistence resources and are inter-connected with fundamental spiritual practices. It likewise undermines socio-cultural integrity by disrupting traditional systems of exchange-based reciprocal kinship ties and obligations; sometimes causes conflict between communities; and, at a minimum, hinders the free exercise of rights of freedom of association for political and cultural purposes.

This provision in the new Act precludes the Wapichan people from obtaining title or extension of title jointly and collectively rather than village by village. At the time of writing this report, the government has so far still failed to address the land rights issue in the South and South Central Districts of the Rupununi in a manner acceptable to our communities (Section 2).

The new Amerindian Act also precludes legal recognition of the collective jurisdiction of the District Toshihos Councils (Section 5) over the full extent of traditional Wapichan lands and territory. To date, the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs has failed to recognise these institutions as legal bodies. Despite this, our inter-community councils continue to meet quarterly, not least because our leaders and communities are convinced that we have the right to form ourselves into a group like anybody else.

There is a pressing need for the government to recognise the District Toshihos Councils and give them legal jurisdiction and decision-making powers in relation to traditional land and the communal Wapichan territory in the Rupununi ... [Jerome Marques, Toshao, 11/05]

Overall, the legal and policy analysis conducted for this study finds that, while the Constitution of Guyana does provide protections for our way of life and cultural heritage, the existing legislative framework does not provide adequate protections for our lands and territory and our traditional livelihoods. In particular the foregoing analysis shows that existing laws and policies:

- Provide only very limited protections for customary natural resource management systems
- make little or no reference to the important linkages between land tenure and customary use of biological resources
- fail to adequately recognise indigenous systems of governance and jurisdiction
- do not recognise the contribution of indigenous peoples to the maintenance of biodiversity
- do not recognise customary land and resource ownership rights in protected areas
- permit curtailment of traditional livelihoods and associated traditional practices

This study thus concludes that existing laws and policies in Guyana are largely inadequate for providing for effective implementation of Article 10(c) of the Convention on Biological Diversity and therefore require considerable revision and amendment.

Some of our main findings on the inadequate nature of land rights legislation under existing laws in Guyana have been echoed by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which has recently reviewed Guyana's compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination Of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). At its 68th Session held in March 2006, the Committee expressed its 'deep concern' about problems with the newly revised Amerindian Act, including the lack of legal recognition of the rights of ownership and possession of indigenous peoples over the lands which they traditionally occupy and use, and about the State party's practice of granting land titles excluding waters and subsoil resources.⁸³

Recommendations on necessary legal and policy reforms to promote implementation of article 10(c) and on other matters are set out in Section 7.

⁸³ CERD (2006) *Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 9 of the Convention – Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: GUYANA* CERD/C/GUY/CO/14

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

It is concluded that the long-term sustainability of the traditional resource use system of the Wapichan people in Guyana is dependent upon the maintenance of our customary system of land tenure, which facilitates collective control and access to extensive areas of land and diverse habitats, and thus allows our communities to practise traditional, low intensity patterns of shifting cultivation and rotational resource use. Sustainable use is reinforced by a set of values, norms and beliefs shared among all Amerindian communities in the South Rupununi, which advise against over-harvesting and stipulate that natural resources and living beings must not be abused or wasted. We find that with a secure and adequate land base, our culture and livelihoods are highly resilient and adaptable to change and we are able to respond to changing environmental conditions and address emerging resource issues.

Under current circumstances, however, the long-term integrity of our indigenous system of sustainable resource use in the South Rupununi is threatened by inadequate land titles that fail to recognise and protect the customary land tenure system and traditional extensive pattern of farming, hunting, fishing and gathering. Existing and potential external threats include the imposition of mining or logging concessions on traditional lands; invasions by illegal miners and hunters, colonisation and land invasion linked to international road construction (Brazil-Guyana); imposed protected areas that may affect existing land claims and restrict traditional livelihood activities (GEF-assisted GPAS project) and imposed and inappropriate tourism activities.

In November 2005, our Village Councils and District Toshaos Councils again reaffirmed that we will never give up our outstanding land claim and we will continue to insist to the government that the land issue in the South Rupununi be resolved. At the same meeting, community leaders affirmed their commitment to promote Wapichan custom and traditional practices in all spheres of community life and to follow-up this project through a series of actions, including dialogue with government; further development of internal rules and improvement of enforcement mechanisms and collaboration between communities to take forward plans to develop a territory-wide management plan.

Recommendations

The elders, leaders, community members and research team who took part in the study also developed several recommendations for the government and international agencies that we consider essential to protect our customary laws, values and traditional practices and to maintain the sustainability of our customary system of land and resource use:

1 The government of Guyana should (a) generally:

- Enact legislative and other measures that recognise and guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples to own, control and peacefully enjoy their traditionally owned lands, territories and resources⁸⁴
- Amend or repeal legislative or other measures – such as the *Wildlife Regulations* – that constrain the aforementioned rights
- Revise and amend relevant laws, regulations and procedures to ensure that the delimitation, demarcation and titling of indigenous and lands and territories are based on applicable customary tenure systems, associated traditional resource management systems and objective criteria, including customary use and spiritual and sacred sites
- Recognise the principle of territoriality and the right of indigenous peoples (not only communities) to collectively own and exercise jurisdiction over their traditional lands and territories, including the waters and resources therein
- Recognise indigenous peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent to plans, policies or activities that may affect their traditional lands, including the right to give or withhold consent regarding such activities

⁸⁴ See also CERD (2006) *Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 9 of the Convention – Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: GUYANA* CERD/C/GUY/CO/14 at paragraphs 15, 16 and 17, among others.

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- Amend environmental impact laws to ensure that indigenous peoples fully participate in impact assessments and the design of impact avoidance or mitigation measures. The regulations should be developed with indigenous peoples' full and informed participation
- Take measures to ensure that protected area establishment and management respect indigenous peoples' customary land tenure and resource management systems and are consistent with indigenous peoples' rights in domestic and international law
- Recognise indigenous peoples' self-designated governance institutions to ensure effective protection of customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional practices, including recognition of their customary laws, internal law-making powers, dispute resolution and law enforcement
- Resolve outstanding land tenure and jurisdictional issues through fair, transparent and mutually acceptable processes
- Ensure that national conservation laws and policies are consistent with international law and international standards on indigenous peoples and biodiversity conservation
- Amend the National Biodiversity Action Plan and conservation policies and laws to recognise indigenous peoples' contribution to the sustainable use of biodiversity and the maintenance of biological resources in Guyana
- Establish and/or strengthen institutional measures to ensure indigenous peoples informed participation in national and regional policy development, planning, and legislative or administrative measures that may affect them, including an inter-agency body involving the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC), the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC) and other relevant agencies and ministries as well as indigenous peoples' freely chosen representatives to discuss issues of concern and agree on measures to address them
- Take steps to ensure that the Indigenous Peoples Commission begins operation as a matter of priority with a fair balance of indigenous and governmental representatives, and ensure environmental issues, including implementation of the CBD are addressed by the Commission
- Encourage the customary use of biological resources through the introduction of various incentive measures in national and local policies, e.g. cooperative agreements between indigenous peoples and state agencies in relation to resource management issues.

(b) In the South Rupununi:

- Take timely measures to address our unresolved land claim and legally recognise and protect our right to own, control and manage the full extent of Wapichan territory, based on our inherent rights and customary tenure
- Use maps produced by our communities and that have been finalised and validated by them, as legal and legitimate evidence to use in land claim and demarcation processes
- Legally recognise the right of several of our communities to hold joint collective title to our territory
- Recognise our representative institutions as legal bodies with decision-making powers and legal jurisdiction as determined by the constituent communities, including the District Toshaos Councils, Regional Toshaos Councils, National Toshaos Council
- Ensure that decisions taken by our representative bodies are respected by government and external agencies and interests
- Recognise our right to freely exercise autonomous authority and to make rules and regulations for the whole of *Wapichan wiizi* and enforce them through our own institutions and communities
- Recognise and support our own resource monitoring systems and enable our institutions to enforce protection of biological resources, habitats and ecosystems
- Take proactive steps to protect and support use of Wapichan language in primary schools
- Ensure that national legislation, policies and official decisions have a positive and supportive effect on Wapichan custom and way of life in accordance with the constitution of Guyana.

2 *International bodies and agencies*

- The World Bank and GEF, the government and conservation agencies should meet with indigenous peoples in the South Rupununi and other indigenous peoples to ensure that the Guyana Protected Areas System project (GPAS) is fully consistent with article 10(c) of the CBD and to discuss how to better address indigenous peoples' issues and concerns in the GPAS project
- Provide support to our own sustainable use and conservation initiatives, including community efforts to develop management plans for our traditional lands and territory
- Support sustainable livelihood and conservation initiatives developed by our own local development NGOs, such as the Association of South Wapichan Communities (AsWAC)

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Verifying 10(c) draft report with Toshao and community members from Shii village, validation meeting, Potarinao, 11/05



Bullock carts are a typical mode of transport in the South Rupununi and enable families to travel to and from distant farming grounds (Potarinao, 11/05)

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Beryl David, one of the co-authors of this report, interviews Julia Paul during the training phase of the project (practical research techniques), Kubai Ton homestead, Aishara Ton, January 2005