

U.E.C.C. – Guyana

Upper Essequibo Conservation Concession



In July 2002, Conservation International and the Government of Guyana entered into an agreement that protects 200,000 acres of pristine forest by establishing the world's first 'Conservation Concession'. Under this unique approach, CI obtained a 30-year logging license for a portion of the upper Essequibo River watershed, with the objective of managing the area for conservation rather than timber exploitation. For this right, CI pays the Government of Guyana annual fees comparable to those that would have been paid by a logging company, and has also provided a Voluntary Community Investment Fund (VCIF) to ensure benefits to local communities.

Benefits

The Upper Essequibo Conservation Concession (UECC) conserves a significant parcel of high biodiversity-value rainforest while generating revenues for Guyana equivalent to those obtainable from logging. In addition, three communities near the UECC – Rewa, Apoteri, and CrashWater – receive training, employment, and investments in socio-economic development. For instance, in return for contributions to conservation, the VCIF has invested in an Ecotourism lodge in Rewa, sheep-rearing facilities in Apoteri, and a handicraft center in CrashWater.

The Conservation Concession demonstrates how to achieve biodiversity conservation as a transaction between a willing seller and a willing buyer, without requiring new legislation or impinging on national sovereignty. Using existing provisions for timber concessions in Guyana, CI has effectively acted as an intermediary between global willingness-to-pay for conservation and Guyana's ability to supply biodiversity conservation services.

The key to this success is that the approach directly addresses the opportunity cost of conservation; by replacing lost timber revenues, it has made foregoing logging acceptable to the Government of Guyana. Modeled on a standard business transaction – the resource lease – this arrangement has proven to be cost-effective for CI and economically viable for Guyana's development. Thus, the approach responds to growing calls for transfers from developed to developing countries to finance conservation, while respecting developing countries' sovereignty by leasing the area in question and preserving ultimate Government authority.



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The UECC represents a particularly notable achievement in Guyana, where years of effort to create a national protected area system have only recently begun to bear fruit. In a challenging political and legal context that was long deadlocked with respect to protected area creation, this approach resulted in clear, unambiguous conservation of 200,000 acres. Moreover, this was achieved using a transparent and participatory approach that gave local communities a direct stake in successful conservation.

Biodiversity Importance

Guyana's forests are part of the Guiana Shield, a region of about 75 million acres of the least disturbed tropical forests on earth that includes parts of Venezuela and Brazil and almost all of Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. Although in the past, remoteness and inaccessibility have protected the Guiana Shield, concerted road-building efforts by the region's governments threaten to accelerate habitat destruction, which is why the establishment of a robust protected area network is an urgent priority. The location of the UECC is highly strategic, forming a link in two chains of planned protected areas – one that spans Guyana from northwest to southeast, and another that stretches eastward from Venezuela across Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana into Brazil.

The UECC contains all the elements of a rich, functioning wilderness ecosystem. Most of Guyana's tree species are present, including the southernmost stands of the endemic and high value Greenheart. The concession protects critical watershed services: the Upper Essequibo River is Guyana's largest source of fresh water, and anchors an aquatic system that features the highest recorded freshwater fish diversity in the world. Finally, the area is home to numerous endangered species, such as the tapir, cock-of-the-rock, harpy eagle, black caiman, giant armadillo, giant river otter and the giant river turtle. All eight of Guyana's primate species are present, as are at least three of Guyana's six cat species – the jaguar, ocelot, and puma.

CI's Mission

Conservation International (CI) believes that the Earth's natural heritage must be maintained if future generations are to thrive spiritually, culturally, and economically. Our mission is to conserve the Earth's living heritage—our global biodiversity—and to demonstrate that human societies are able to live harmoniously with nature.



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