

## 7 Territorial Integrity, Conservation and Sustainable Use

As summarised above, the near four million hectares of the Upper Caura have been under effective indigenous administration, use, management and control since time immemorial. This long history of land occupation, management and use has ensured that the natural resources of the region have remained in the well conserved state in which they are found today.

Customary laws and traditional practices underpin this successful history of land use, but the indigenous peoples have responded to their changing circumstances in a number of important ways, adapting their customary use systems and traditional practices to deal with the new threats and opportunities that confront them.



**Two-way radios, installed in most communities, allow the highly dispersed settlements to co-ordinate on a daily basis**

At least since the late 1960s, the Ye'kwana have had a conscious policy of defending their territory against outside intrusion. They have achieved this by a number of means. First, they have established communities at riverine access points to discourage entry by colonists and miners into their territory. In this way they have asserted their proprietary rights to their territory and sought to regulate access by non-indigenous persons. In the early 1970s, the Ye'kwana of the Upper Ventuari mobilised to expel miners trying to enter their lands by air<sup>38</sup> and in the 1990s, in the Upper Caura, the Ye'kwana decided to close their own placer mines so wildcat miners would not be tempted to invade their territory.

Commencing in 1983, with funding from international non-governmental organizations, the Ye'kwana have also begun to install two-way radios in all their main villages to facilitate the establishment of a basin-wide communications network. Since the late 1990s, more of these radios have begun to be made available to the larger and more established Sanema villages also. Most of these radios are now equipped with high antennas, solar panels, batteries and chargers. They allow the communities to exchange information amongst themselves, organize their interactions with government bureaux and private sector agencies and call for emergency medical assistance from Ciudad Bolivar. They are also used to coordinate inter-community meetings, trading voyages and, increasingly, to plan the management of their territory.

### **Basinwide, Multi-ethnic Association**

In the mid-1990s, in response to Government plans to construct a major dam that would divert the waters of the Upper Caura into the Paragua, the Ye'kwana decided they needed to establish a multi-ethnic basin wide association to defend their territory against incursions. The resulting organization, 'Kuyujani', was named after the culture hero of myth who had first defined the boundaries of the territory (see above). The express aims of Kuyujani are to secure the indigenous peoples' rights to their territory, prevent destructive developments in the region and promote effective management of the territory.

The organisation is subject to the authority of an annual General Assembly which brings together members of all the communities of the region. The Assembly elects the members of Kuyujani for a two-year term during which period they seek to act in the collective interest of the communities and represent them in negotiations with outside interests. During its two year term, Kuyujani is comprised of a Council made up of 10 regional representatives from the various parts of the river basin, 14 spokespersons on key issues such as health, education, human rights, environment, development, sport and culture and 4 elected chiefs, two of whom are Ye'kwana and two Sanema. Day to day functions are carried out by a small bureau which includes a Coordinator, his Deputy, a Secretary General, an Executive Secretary and an Administrator. An accountant is also contracted to handle the organisations finances.

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Coppens, 1972, *The Anatomy of a Land Invasion Scheme in Yekuana Territory – Venezuela*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Document 9, Copenhagen.

### Land use mapping based on traditional knowledge

In 1996, with technical assistance from the Universidad Nacional Experimental de Guayana, and the Forest Peoples Programme, and with financial support from the IUCN-Netherlands and the Rainforest Foundation UK, Kuyujani embarked on a major project to map their customary system of land use and the extent of their territory based on their traditional knowledge. The project entailed training 12 Ye'kwana and Sanema individuals in basic mapping techniques so they could then themselves survey their territory and map it.

An intensive five week training workshop was held at the Para Falls to initiate this exercise. Trainees were taught about the points of the compass, how to read a compass, taking a bearing, plotting a bearing and triangulation. They were taught the meaning of grids, latitude and longitude, coordinates, plotting coordinates, scale, legends and symbols, reading contours, identifying river sources and watersheds, keeping map inventories and recording boundaries. They were also taught the use of geomatic devices (GPS – Global Positioning Systems) including taking a position, recording coordinates, using the devices' mapping and tracking function and taking bearings. Instruction continued in the means of recording indigenous knowledge through interviews, making sketches of land use, rivers and trails, working with guides and relating this knowledge to geo-referenced locations. Finally methods were taught for entering this information onto the base maps. Boundaries, information on land use and toponymy were all entered onto the government's base maps.

A legend and set of symbols was developed for recording land-use information and standard orthographies were elaborated to try to ensure consistent spelling of features. A format for carrying out a census in each community was also developed. Standard travel logs to record named features and corresponding GPS-derived coordinates were also prepared (a section of the final map is shown below).





**GPS training**



**Using GPS to geo-reference and record traditional knowledge and land use**

After this training, the indigenous field teams then spent the following nine months traversing the entire territory, spending an average of three weeks in each community and trekking and canoeing about the village lands to record as much as possible of the local knowledge of the landscape.

The draft map once assembled from all this information was then printed up and sent back to the communities to be checked for accuracy. Once approved by the General Assembly, the finalised map was printed up and presented to the government in 1998.

