

A person with dark hair, wearing a dark grey t-shirt with a blue graphic and yellow and blue striped shorts, stands in a dense, lush green forest. They are looking down at a black smartphone held in their right hand. The forest is filled with various types of trees and thick undergrowth, with sunlight filtering through the canopy. The overall scene is a natural, outdoor setting.

WHERE THEY STAND

FRED PEARCE

Territory of the Wapichan people in Guyana



Rights of the Wapichan people

“The root of the Wapichan’s case for extending their title – to take back the 85 per cent of their traditional land that the government has so far refused them -- is that they alone know how to use it. They are bound to that land, and they are its true custodians.”

Fred Pearce

Village	
Satellite Village	
Forest	
Savannah	



Photo: Fred Pearce

On the face of it, Tessa Felix is like any young office worker. She turns up promptly for our morning meeting, cycling sedately to her office in slacks and a t-shirt bearing a corporate logo, logging onto the internet connection as we chat, and cursing its slow response.

But when I ask about her work, her world suddenly seems very different from the average office drudge. She begins telling me about her grandfather, who was once a chief, or toshao, of the village where we are talking – a village deep in the south of Guyana, a former British colony in South America, on the southern shores of the Caribbean.

“When I was a child, my grandfather took me into the forest. He went fishing. He showed me the secret places of our people and told me our stories,” she says. “My work now is about preserving my grandfather’s legacy. I feel the land belongs to me and my people. Everything we want is here. My grandfather said that I was born from the Earth and I believe that. Our land is like our mother. Now I want to fight for our land. I want to continue my grandfather’s work, so we can govern the land which belongs to us.”

Tessa’s village is Shulinab, a community of some 500 people a two hours’ drive down a pot-holed and frequently flooded dirt road from the rodeo town of Lethem. Her people are the Wapichan, a tribe of Amerindians who live among southern Guyana’s rich savannah grasslands and rainforests, an area known as Rupununi, bordered by Brazil to the west and south, and Surinam to the east.

They are forest hunters with bows and arrows, but also farmers and cattle ranchers. They speak their native language, but also fluent English. They can spend weeks in their territories, walking the ancient trails, swimming the creeks and climbing the trees, and visiting their ancestral graves and sacred forests. But they navigate as much by using a GPS app on their smartphones as traditional knowledge, and would happily drive home in an ATV. During my visit, after days in PowerPoint meetings defending their traditional land rights, they settled down to watch the World Cup in Brazil, lubricated with their traditional cassava beer, scooped from a collective bucket.

To an outsider, the land of the Wapichan undoubtedly appears empty. Travelling between villages, I drove for hours across the grasslands without passing more than an occasional hunter and cattle herder. There are just 9000 Wapichan people in Rupununi, occupying traditional territories the size of Wales. The Wapichan people of southern Guyana want legal title to their traditional land. But the Government of this former British colony is, so far, more interested in parcelling their land out to gold miners. Some question whether, in the modern world, they can rightfully claim title to land that amounts to three square kilometres each. The Guyanese government has so far disregarded their claim, while parcelling out large parts of the contested land to mining companies.

“My work now is about preserving my grandfather’s legacy. I feel the land belongs to me and my people. Everything I want is here.”



Photo: Fred Pearce

But the Wapichan insist that they have a right to full legal title, and securing that right is today their central collective purpose. Most remarkably, to justify their claim they have mapped and catalogued their territory in far greater detail, and with much more accuracy, even than the government. The main maps are now done – with 40,000 digital points collated and cross-checked by Californian digital mappers, and detailed notes from interviews with elders about the importance of every creek, homestead and forest clearing. And they have developed a plan to protect it, using traditional knowledge and methods of land use -- in particular through the creation of a large community forest, managed and protected for hunting and gathering, for swidden farming and for science and tourism. Covering 1.4 million hectares, the forest would, says Tom Griffiths of the UK-based Forest Peoples Programme, which works in solidarity with the Wapichan, be one of the world's largest community-conserved forests.

Their case is bolstered by recent research showing that community-run forests worldwide -- including in the Brazilian Amazon next door – are better protected, richer in biodiversity, and contain more carbon, than other forests, including those managed by governments as national parks. This growing understanding is adding voices to calls for more forest land – including protected areas and those set aside for carbon sequestration – to be titled to the communities who traditionally occupy, use and claim them. But the Wapichan fear that the government of Guyana does not read the scientific literature, and could treat the imperatives of conservation as another reason to exclude them from their land.

Six years ago, Tessa joined one of the land planning teams, holding detailed discussions with all 17 Wapichan communities about their vision for their territory. Now she goes out

investigating reports of their territory being invaded – by gold miners crossing the border from Brazil, and by loggers, illegal fishers and cattle rustlers.

Her last trip took her to the Marudi Mountains in the south of the Wapichan lands to check on how a big new Canadian-owned mine was polluting rivers that the Wapichan rely on for fish. Armed with kit supplied by the government geological survey, she recorded how clear rushing streams had been turned to cloudy cascades of mud and mercury. The upper reaches of the Marudi River had levels of turbidity that government scientists told her would kill any fish. “I know villagers who get their fish from that river,” she tells me in horror, before grabbing her mobile phone to show me the video she took of the filthy flow.

The Wapichan see no reason why their growing sophistication in the ways of the modern world – GPS, Internet and the rest – should make their land needs and entitlements any less necessary. And Tessa – 25-year-old IT whizz, political sophisticate and bush tracker – is a living refutation of the idea that the new generation of Wapichan, and other indigenous peoples, have to “choose” between modern and traditional ways. She, like them, wants her traditional lands AND a better Internet connection.

“Our land is being taken away from us often without us even knowing,” Nicholas Fredericks, once a precocious Wapichan cowboy and now a husband, father, village leader and coordinator of land use monitoring, told me one morning over breakfast made from local produce. “Outsiders have a financial view of the land. They see it as money. We see it as life. We have to win.”



Photo: Fred Pearce

Nobody knows how long the Wapichan have been in Rupununi, a region named after the major river that flows through it north to the ocean. They may have come from Brazil, or been there all along. What is clear is that they were established dwellers of the country's forested interior prior to the arrival of Dutch traders in the 18th century, occupying a large area of Rupununi between the Macushi people to the north and the Wai-wai to the south.

Like most Amerindian communities, they suffered grievously from raids by slave traders and from European diseases, and were persuaded out of the forests and onto the savannah grasslands in the 19th century, by the mostly Jesuit missionaries, who established schools and churches to "civilize" them.

Efforts to fence them in began in the early 20th century, when the British, who took over from the Dutch, created a series of "reservations" round major villages. Regarding the rest as unoccupied, they offered it for commercial cattle ranching. There were not many takers, but the Rupununi Development Company, set up by a Scottish entrepreneur, leased 670,000 hectares. Its Dadanawa Ranch on the banks of the Rupununi river once had more than 25,000 head of cattle in what it claimed was the most remote ranch in the world. The ranch is still there, albeit with only a sixth as many cattle.

In the 1960s, with the British ready to head home, Amerindians campaigned to get their traditional lands formally recognised in the independence settlement. An Amerindian Land Commission heard evidence from leaders such as the Wapichan's Henry Winters, who laid claim to 2.8 million hectares, between the River Takato, which borders Brazil in the west, and Essequibo, close to the border with Surinam in the east. The Commissioners turned him

down, however, and eventually in 1991, the Wapichan were granted formal legal title to just 15 per cent of their claim, 430,000 hectares.

If the government thought that was the end of the matter, it was wrong. In the mid-1990s, two new leaders took up the cause: Tony James, Winters' nephew and one-time chief of all the Wapichan, and Patrick Gomes, an eloquent leader of Marora Naawa village. Both spoke to me at length about their efforts to secure title to their traditional lands, and the changes taking place in their communities.

Their initial demands caused a stir. Sufficient for the country's then-President, Cheddi Jagan, to visit James' village, Aishalton. While there, he challenged the people to say how they would use the land they claimed. "Jagan laid down the gauntlet, and we picked it up," says James. "We set out to justify our claim." They decided to do this by mapping their traditional land, documenting its use and constructing a plan for future tenure and stewardship.

Work began in earnest on the project in 2002 and took almost a decade to complete. It received outside financial and technical support from, among others, the Canadian aid agency CIDA, the European Union, the UNDP, the UK-based Forest Peoples Programme and most recently the British government and a Welsh charity called The Size of Wales, which aims to protect an area of tropical rainforest the size of their country. Tom Griffiths of the Forest Peoples Programme, who has mentored progress for 15 years, says that probably no indigenous community in the world has devoted such resources to such a project.



Photo: Greg MacLennan

But the mapping has always been about more than maps. It is about the Wapichan’s sense of themselves, and their traditions of collective ownership of the land.

“In the early days there was no GPS,” says James. “We just walked, following government maps and adding detail to them from our knowledge. But with GPS we have been able to do things much more precisely.” Angelbert Johnny, a former acting toshao of Shawaraworo village, remembers: “We assembled people in each village and found the elders and experts on the creeks, forests and mountains. They were our guides as we walked, or took boats and bicycles and horses to survey the land. We went far from the villages, sometimes travelling for a month. It was hard. People got bitten by snakes. One guy had to be dragged out of the bush and given bush medicine to cure him. Another got lost for two days. But we went everywhere and mapped everything. Often we had to put our GPS equipment on poles and push them up through the forest canopy to get a signal.”



Photos: Greg MacLennan



Photo: Tom Griffiths

Mapping culture and land use

The Wapichan mappers found numerous errors in government maps, many of which were first drawn using primitive colonial mapping techniques. Villages were wrongly situated and creeks endlessly confused. But the government mappers won't be told. "They just say our maps are wrong, even when the evidence is obvious and corroborated by satellites," says Ron James, an intense and charismatic Wapichan mapper and IT enthusiast, who coordinates data collection for the Wapichan's mappers. It was an early lesson in the obduracy of desk-bound government officials in faraway Georgetown.

But the mapping has always been about more than maps. It is about the Wapichan's sense of themselves, and their traditions of collective ownership of the land. "Mapping awakened the struggle for land among our people," says Johnny. "It brought people together." Along with the cartography, the Wapichan documented their lives, culture and traditions. This too they regard as part of justifying their land claim. They call this aspect the "I0c project", after a clause in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, which says governments should "protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation and sustainable uses practices." If they document their customary use, they reason, the government should recognise their land.

Claudine La Rose, a mother from Shulinab village, recalls: "I went to all 17 Wapichan communities for the project, interviewing elders. We wrote everything down and translated everything into English or Wapichan so there were no misunderstandings. It was very

enriching. The elders felt their knowledge was valued, and we youngsters gained a new sense of those traditions, and realised they related to our own lives.

"The elders told us how we came to be in the mountains, about the sacred sites and the spirit grandfathers that preside over natural resources. How, if you cut down certain trees in the forest you will get sick and die, punished by the spirits who live in the mountains and creeks." She learned especially about the spirits and laws connected to many traditional women's activities, like collecting water from eternal springs and firewood, and extracting clay from creeks to make pots.

Some of the material has been deliberately kept off maps and deleted from published versions of the I0c project. These include the location of spiritual sites and old settlements with graves, says Johnny. "The elders feared that outsiders would take away our knowledge. They told us: 'don't give away our information'. Some things we won't even write down."

Since completing the main maps, surveyors have returned regularly to the bush to map invasions of their land – pinpointing often to within a few metres the location of illegal gold mines and places where cattle rustlers and others cross from Brazil. "In one six-day patrol along the river that forms the border with Brazil, we found 30 crossings, six of them active," says Ron James. The patrols have a deterrent effect. "The rustlers fear what they call the 'monitors with smart phones'. They turn back if they hear we are around."



Photo: Tom Griffiths

James's data mapping is done in collaboration with the Forest Peoples Programme and Greg MacLennan, an activist at Digital Democracy, a San Francisco NGO that provides technical support for communities round the world who are mapping their territories. MacLennan hopes soon to provide maps for the Wapichan in a form that they can keep on tablets and download and update using their own website, which is being funded through FPP by the British government and Size of Wales.

Another ambition is to augment the monitoring of invasions with satellite imagery. But, so far, MacLennan says, this hasn't worked effectively. "The resolution of publicly available satellite images is not good enough to pick out most illegal mines." There have been too many false leads. One day, drones might help. But meanwhile, walking through the forest with a GPS in hand is more reliable.

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Photos: Tom Griffiths



Photo: Tom Griffiths

The purpose of the hugely time-consuming mapping was to meet the government's challenge, and to demonstrate how the Wapichan use the land they claim as their own. The government's implied promise was that if they could do that, then their formal title would be extended from pockets round their villages to cover a large swathe of savannah and forests that make up Wapichan territory. All this should now be bringing results. The maps and claims have been in Georgetown for years. But so far, there has been a deafening silence.

Some individual village claims have been acknowledged, and the government has signed up for an Amerindian Land Titling Project paid for by the UN Development Programme. But a 2013 land use plan prepared by the government largely ignores their claims, and villages say they have seen no sign that ministers are as yet actively considering, still less ruling on, them.

Instead, say village leaders, the government complains that the Wapichan have had the temerity to map land not yet under village title, and hinted that the exercise was concocted by politically motivated outsiders. All this, they note angrily, while ministers continue to grant licences for development of timber and mining concessions within the disputed extension land.

"It is very frustrating. We know the land much better than they do. Our maps are better than theirs. But they seem to regard them as worthless," says Johnny. "They asked us to justify our demand for the land extension. We have done that. But now they ignore us."

The men who started the process, Tony James and Patrick Gomes, say what is urgently needed is stronger political advocacy from a new generation of Wapichan leaders. "Some people thought the maps and the reports would win our battle. They won't. They only provide the tools," says Gomes. He fears the government is currently engaged in delaying tactics. "I see the extensions being delayed and delayed, and when the time comes, most of the areas claimed will already be occupied by outsiders: miners, loggers and commercial farmers. If we want to continue to live as we do, then we need to continue to advocate for our land rights."

There is discontent in some villages about how the current leaders are going about this. Some say they have been co-opted by the government, and no longer speak for their people, particularly at a national level. "From the start, Tony and I wanted to build a network of village leaders and give them a national voice on land issues," says Gomes. Working with indigenous leaders from other parts of Guyana, they set up a National Toshi Council to do just that. Back then, they say, Wapichan and other toshaos were independent voices, exerting the power of elected office.

"But the government decided to fight back against this political power," says Tony James. It began paying the toshaos and treating them as agents of central government -- paid officials rather than the representatives of their people. Meanwhile national political parties, such as the ruling PPP, became active in the villages, forming youth groups and lobbying for party yes-men to get leadership roles.



Photo: Tom Griffiths

“There is a lot of divisive politics in the villages today,” says Ron James. “Some of our leaders are getting co-opted by the government, which pays them a wage and offers inducements.” Many of the more assertive leaders have suffered what are widely seen as smear tactics. Angelbert Johnny was criticised by a village priest during elections in Shawaraworo. And rumours were spread about Kid James, the outspoken son of Tony, who was narrowly defeated in toshao elections in Aishalton.

Faye Fredericks, the women’s chair in Shulinab, says the annual meeting of the National Toshao Council has been neutralised. “They only get two or three minutes to speak. The atmosphere is intimidatory. They are asked to sign up to things they don’t understand and can’t take back to their villages to discuss. We badly need someone to speak up and demand our rights, especially for our land extensions. The leaders have to take a stand.”

And there is a power of patronage that can sometimes feel like bribery. Government services that might be taken for granted elsewhere reach Wapichan villages in the form of high-profile “gifts” from the President and ministries – gifts that, it is widely felt, might be withheld for bad behaviour. They include things like the solar panels handed out to most houses in 2012 to provide basic power, and the Internet service now available in three villages. I was driven between villages in government-issue ATVs. Computer rooms are promised.

This largesse, though small fry in the government’s budget, looms large in the lives of villagers. And many are duly grateful. Elmo James, a carpenter whose grandfather was a founder of Shulinab village, says: “We get a lot from this government. Before, we didn’t have anything. The solar panels were a big change for the village. So we are pleased.”

Most villages have a constant shopping list of new requests from the government, and fear losing the favour that might provide them. The toshao of Shii village told me her people

wanted an improved bridge, a road that doesn’t become impassable in the wet season, more training for teachers and more drugs at the health clinic. And they wanted a road to the Essequibo River -- “just for us, so we can fish and hunt, and bring back Brazil nuts and traditional medicines.”

She is no radical, and feels caught between standing up for her people on land issues and ensuring they got their share of the smaller things on offer. “Sometimes we feel we have to keep silent when we don’t want to.” But she complains quietly that “the government do things without telling us. Maybe they don’t realise. We don’t get newspapers out here, so we don’t know what is happening even when people in Georgetown do.”

That tension ran through a two-day meeting of Wapichan toshaos and other leaders and activists that I attended in the nursery school in Marora Naawa village. Many of the hundred or so people who met, under the eye of pictures of the president and prime minister, had travelled for a day or more in cars, by bike, on horses or foot. There was anger that three village toshaos were not with them. There were claims that the three had been told the meeting was somehow illegal, because it was not sanctioned by the government, and that villages would suffer if their toshaos attended. One toshao was in Georgetown meeting ministers rather than talking to his people.

Dorothy James, the wife of Tony James and firebrand women’s leader from Aishalton, the biggest Wapichan village with more than a thousand inhabitants, accused some toshaos of being brainwashed by the government. There is a National Toshao Council meeting coming up. Stabbing the air and glaring through her dark-rimmed glasses, she warned them: “You have the power, but you don’t use it. Don’t be silent. You need to stand together at this upcoming forum and demand that the land issue be addressed now, and if they do not want to listen, you toshaos can stage a walk out. Or do you need me to go up to Georgetown with my women to do it for you?”



Photo: Tom Griffiths

Custodians of nature

The root of the Wapichan's case for extending their title – to take back the 85 per cent of their traditional land that the government has so far refused them -- is that they alone know how to use it. They are bound to that land, and they are its true custodians.

The Wapichan use their traditional lands extensively, but with care. They hunt over large areas of forest and savannah for deer, bush hogs, agouti and armadillos, but only take what they need for their own families. Killing more, they say, would empty the larder for future generations. They farm in the forest. But their shifting cultivation moves on regularly and leaves the land fallow for long periods before returning. Their cattle range over huge unfenced areas of the savannah. They leave some areas of land entirely alone, because of its spiritual meaning as burial grounds or former settlements, and sometimes as refuges for wildlife.

Everything in Rupununi is spread out. Many families have three homes: one in their village, another on their bush farm some miles away, and a third a day or more away, where they hunt or fish in the forest, or raise cattle. Even their villages, most of which are sited where the forest and grasslands meet, spread across the land, with the traditional wood- and-thatch houses often hundreds of metres apart.

For most, farming is a part-time activity. Jerry Bell Peters lives in Shulinab, which is a mixed village containing both Wapichan and Macushi people, where his children go to school. But he spends weekends at his farm 25 kilometres away on the site of a former forest village in the cool of the Kanuku mountains, where organic waste created by past settlement means the soil are rich. He has worked in Boa Vista over the border in Brazil. But he always

returns, and he hopes one of his children will take over his farm one day, just as he did from his parents and grandparents.

Cassava is the staple crop – a source of flour for bread, of starch for the local beer and wine, of farine (dried high-energy cassava granules that are great for travelling with), and of a popular spicy sauce used like ketchup. In the villages, most families these days also grow vegetables and have some free-range chickens, a few cattle and pigs that have to be fenced off the sports field or they dig it up. There are sheep too in some villages, and bullock carts still provide transport.

The Wapichan probably have fewer commercial activities in the forests than for a century. They used to bleed the native bully trees for balata, a rubber-like latex that was a major export for Guyana from the 1920s to the 1970s. "Men would spend months in the forest collecting balata," says Tony James. "Balata camps and trails could be found over almost the entire territory." Air strips were built to fly it out. But today the trade is largely ended, and most of those distant trails are used only by villagers hunting or gathering medicines or traditional craft materials."

Some Wapichan families run ranching businesses in the savannah. Village leader Nicholas Fredericks was brought up on the Red Hill Ranch near Shulinab, which was set up by his mother and uncle. He rode horses from a young age and, when 13, won the best-dressed cowboy prize at the annual rodeo in Lethem. He longs for the day he can go back to his ranch, he told me – when the land politics is resolved. Asaph Wilson, a ranger, guide and expert on the savannah's birdlife, is from a family that set up the Six Brothers ranch near Katoonarub.



Photo: Tom Griffiths

But ranching is no longer a thriving business in such a remote place. Transport costs are too high. Short of ways to generate cash from their own land, many families rely on temporary migration. Family members mine for gold in the hills, or find jobs in Lethem, Georgetown or Boa Vista. This is clearly not sustainable if the Wapichan want a viable future on their own land. If they are to thrive without government handouts and constant migration, they must find new sources of income based on their extensive lands.

The best chance could lie in exploiting nature for tourism— both in the forests and the savannah. Currently, only a few hundred tourists come here each year. Most are scientists, students and eco-tourists, staying at the Dadanawa ranch, which is now devoted as much to conservation as to its cattle. Tours of Wapichan land are organised from there by Rupununi Trails, a small company run by Justin de Freitas, who is also manager of the ranch.

Some Wapichan villages have built small guests houses in the hope of encouraging tourists to experience village life as well as wildlife. But, while the food is good, they rarely meet Western expectations. One I stayed in required a hundred-metre walk in the darkness to find a latrine. There were rattlesnakes, I was told. A model is the successful community tourist operation in Surama, a Macushi village in North Rupununi set up at an old staging post on a cattle trail. It plays regular host to American college students who can enjoy modern plumbing as well as village culture and eco-tours.

Access to Wapichan territories remains a problem for all but the most intrepid. While the dirt roads across the savannah from Lethem are heavily potholed and seasonally impassable because of floods, there are grass airstrips at several villages. Once used to fly out balata, they remain open today mainly for air ambulances. But even here there are problems. Southern Guyana's airspace is literally off the radar. A pilot for the air ambulance service

that I met in the tin departure hall at Lethem airport said there was no weather forecast for pilots upcountry. He had to make his own forecasts based on hourly NASA satellite images of storm clouds downloaded onto his mobile phone.

But if tourists can get there, the experience is magical. Much of the vast expanse of bright green grasses, occasional stunted trees and huge skies in the Rupununi resembles east Africa, albeit without elephants and giraffes. There are jaguars hunting for deer, however, as well as rich bird life including harpy eagles, pearl kites, savanna hawks and the near endemic Finsch's euphonia, as well as the stand-out favourite, a small bright orange finch called the red siskin. Previously known only in a few spots in neighbouring Venezuela, and for a while thought extinct, the red siskin was discovered recently in larger numbers by local Wapichan rangers working for the South Rupununi Conservation Society, a body set up a decade ago by de Freitas with Nicholas Fredericks as President.

The discovery helped prompt WWF to organise a major biodiversity assessment of Rupununi in 2013, in which rangers and foreign researchers married indigenous knowledge with conventional science. The full findings are not yet published, but the two-week expedition recorded more than a thousand species. Asaph Wilson hopes parts of the region can be made an Important Bird Area, an international designation that would encourage visits by bird-watchers. Next, they want to set up camera traps to track jaguars, in the hope of creating a jaguar reserve. All this forms part of the Wapichan's case for extending their land title and creating the giant community forest.

But time is short. Land grabbers want this terrain. In many respects it resembles the old unfenced cerrado grasslands in Brazil, which in recent years have been turned into fenced



Maxi Ignace in the forest monitoring land use with GPS

Photo: Fred Pearce

prairies of corn, cotton and soya. A Barbadian investor, Sir Kyffin Simpson, is currently creating a 12,000-hectare farm, called Santa Fe, on what he describes as “former wasteland” near Lethem. He plans to grow rice, corn and soya, much of it for export to Brazil. A big agricultural company is rumoured to have its eyes on an area known locally as Machao-Pao, where red siskins live. And the government itself, defying research evidence, still appears to regard taking lands from communities as the best method of doing conservation.

The test case for conservation is likely to be the Kanuku Mountains, a forested zone covering 500,000 hectares. The mountains form the traditional boundary between Macushi and Wapichan territories. Under the stewardship of these two groups, the forests there have nurtured more biodiversity than anywhere else in Guyana, including totemic species such as black caiman, giant river otters, harpy eagles, giant anteaters and arapaima, the largest freshwater fish in South America. Now the government is to introduce state protection.

There are as yet no rangers or other signs of government conservation activity in the mountains. It is for now nothing more than a “paper park”, says Rene Edwards, the local head of the US-based group Conservation International. But the Wapichan, who claim customary land rights within the park, say nobody from the government has spoken to them about its management plans. It is far from clear if Wapichan claims to stewardship will be recognised.

What goes for the Kanuku Mountains could also go for the rest of Rupununi – with potentially disastrous results for both conservation and Amerindian land rights. At international climate negotiations in 2010, Guyana’s president Bharrat Jagdeo told the world that “we have decided to protect our entire forest”. His pledge, part of a promised Low Carbon Development Strategy, was greeted with acclamation at the conference. But in Rupununi, it looks like a sham. For, since 2009, the government has been quietly parcelling out large areas of forest in

the same areas to mining and logging concessions – and refusing to discuss the implications for either conservation or Amerindian land rights.

A company called Bai Shan Lin, a major of the China Forest Industry Group, a state enterprise, is reported to have access to almost one-million hectares of forest along the valleys of the Rewa and Essequibo rivers. Company chairman Chu Wenze says his “virgin forest resource” contains 120 million cubic metres of “harvestable log volume”, and he has an agreement with the Guyanese government to set up a large complex for processing and exporting timber. The company is also putting in a major road to get the timber out, and recent unconfirmed reports suggest logging is under way. Chu also has permission to excavate 20 kilometres of river bed for gold.

Some Wapichan have worked for loggers in other parts of Guyana, and have seen the damage that even highly selective logging can do. Maxi Ignace, brother of a village toshao, sold skills in bushcraft and GPS that he learned while surveying for the Wapichan maps to Farfan & Mendes, a well-established Guyana logging company with a reputation for “sustainable” methods. He went out locating valuable trees such as greenheart. But he was disturbed by the experience.

“They made roads so wide that the animals wouldn’t cross,” Ignace tells me as we walk in the bush one day. “Often when I was looking for the commercial trees, I saw sloths sitting on branches right by the road, and I took them to the other side of the road.” The selective felling brought down many other trees because the forest was linked up by extensive networks of vines. “I just felt bad and left,” he says quietly, as he adjusted his bandana and walked ahead. “I wouldn’t work with a company like that again.”



Photo: Marcus Colchester

The Wapichan fear that the logging roads will become an access route for invasions onto their land in an area that Asaph Wilson says is vital for wildlife, with jaguars, ocelots, jaguarondis (small pumas), anacondas, giant spiders, caimans, tapirs and armadillos. Commercial hunters will come, he says. “They don’t care what damage they do to nature. They have high powered rifles and dogs, and they kill as many animals as they can. They waste the animals, whereas we only catch for our needs.”

The lesson should be clear, says Faye Fredericks. “The government has to see that indigenous people are the best protectors of the forests. The land is dear to us. We use the forests but we don’t destroy them. They should be encouraging us to take charge of the forests and protect them.”



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Photo: Tom Griffiths

Gold in the hills

For many decades, the Wapichan have mined their traditional lands for gold, tunnelling into gold seams in the Marudi mountains. But in recent years, outsiders have entered their domains. The usurpers include wildcat Brazilian miners, small Guyanese companies and international mining groups. With a gold rush seemingly getting under way in their lands, tensions are high.

The Marudi mountains are part of the lands claimed by Aishalton. But that hasn't stopped the development of a 5000-hectare mining concession that is operated by a Canadian company, Mulgravian Ventures. "They came with no consultation with the community," says villager Dorothy James. In 2013, police and company security staff ejected village miners from the concession area. One of them was Clifton Rodriguez, who had mined there for 30 years. "We had different crews, each with their own position. I used to take youths who had not done well at school up there to learn about mining. We were part of our community. But last year the company beat us out. The government is selling our land, with no regard for us. They never even contact us."

Dorothy James says the economic impact on the village is great. "We have a list of a hundred local people who have lost their livelihoods. The company does not offer jobs to our boys. It does not even buy produce in our stores. It gives us nothing." A year ago, her women's group briefly blocked company excavators driving through their village.

Artisan miners often have a bad reputation. But Rodriguez insists that the local miners never polluted the mountain streams, on which their downstream neighbours rely for fish. They have sometimes used mercury to extract the gold, he agrees. "But we catch all the mercury and use it again. There are no spills. We produce no pollution. The problems happen if you are careless and use too much."

Locals say they fear big mining will bring a repeat of an environmental disaster in 1995 at a gold mine on the Omai river to the north, when a tailings dam run by another Canadian-owned mining company collapsed, releasing 3 billion litres of cyanide-contaminated waste water. It drained into the River Essequibo, which was declared a disaster zone for 80 kilometres of its course. Sales of fish from the river were banned.

But the mines also bring social pollution. Dorothy's husband, Tony James, says Para Bara, a village near mining activity in the far south of Rupununi, is now infected by alcoholism, drugs and prostitution. He blames Brazilian miners, who he says have bribed local officials to be allowed to stay in the village. There is even hunger now, he says. "Before, we never had that. Everybody shared the food they grew on their land. But now in the mining areas, they buy it, and won't share with their old relatives, who go hungry."

There is no obvious end in sight to the gold rush on Wapichan land. New mining concessions were being auctioned off for mining near Aishalton early in 2013. The Minister of Natural Resources, Robert Persaud, visited the village in May 2013, as anger raged. He promised that no more mining blocks would be let, and that his officials would consult villagers about land that had already been handed over without their consent. "But till today that hasn't happened," Dorothy James says.

Meanwhile, Wapichan mapping reveals that substantial parts of the land claims of four other villages have been awarded to outsider miners. "Nearly half the extension area for Achawib is now under concessions," says chief mapper Ron James. In neighbouring Karaodaz Naawa, "more than half the extension is in a mining block." When he showed his maps at the meeting in Marora Naawa, many were horrified and said they had no idea about the awards.



Illegal mining operation

Photo: Tom Griffiths

Brazilian miners are building a road from the border to Para Bara that would provide a direct link to the Brazilian boom town of Boa Vista, says Ron James. “It will open up a huge area of the remote south,” including both Wapichan lands and more remote territories to the south, he says. In these border lands, there are communities that still have very little contact with the outside world, including the few remaining homesteads of the Taruma, a people once thought extinct.

The government has shut down some illegal Brazilian mining in the Marudi mountains in the past three years. But ensuring every miner has a licence means little when corruption in handing out those licences is reportedly rife. “Contributions of gold mining to the national treasury, together with the personal enrichment of a significant slice of the political and economic elite, have rendered gold-mining above the law in Guyana in recent years”, the Guyana Human Rights Association recently claimed. “The influx of miners will re-ignite land disputes and the traffic in prostitution and associated social distress will accelerate.”

Ironically, notes the association’s co-president Mike McCormack, many of the Brazilians are coming north because they have been displaced by the successful establishment and policing of the indigenous tribal lands of the Yanomami and others in Brazil. Ron James agrees. “People used to say that Brazilian Amazon was the Wild West. But there is much more law enforcement in Brazil today. Guyana is the wild west now.”



Photo: Tom Griffiths



Photo: Tom Griffiths

Dependency or empowerment

A clash of cultures is being played out in Wapichan communities. It is one well known to indigenous and traditional rural peoples round the world. Self-sufficiency is declining. More and more food and goods are brought in from outside rather than being made or grown in the villages. Will that bring dependency, or a new empowerment for people to choose what they want?

While some people can happily embrace both worlds, many are confused. Particularly the young, says Tony James. Most Wapichan children now attend secondary school, and that usually means living outside their home village. This is disorienting. Moreover, they are taught one thing in school by outsider teachers delivering a national curriculum, and another by elders in their villages. “The schools do not teach our type of agriculture. The children listen to both, but they can’t decide.”

At the meeting in Marora Naawa, there was an intense debate about a secondary school in Sand Creek village that had been built on sacred land. The spirits were angry, people said. As a result, the children were getting sick and behaving strangely. Parents said they would not let their children return in the autumn term. To an outsider, talk of angry spirits seemed like metaphor. Alien education and the loss of old ways was the real problem – children far from home were sitting at desks and learning how to work in towns, rather than out in the bush being taught to hunt and fish. They were understandably confused. But for them and their parents, the sense of having betrayed the Wapichan spirits was undoubtedly real.

Once they finish school, many Wapichan leave their villages to find work. “They are going to college, or to the mines or Brazil,” says Tessa Felix. “They do often come back. But right now, of my 22 classmates at school, only six are still here.” This too creates a sense of flux and impermanence in villages where life was once much more stable.

The elders, like their counterparts round the world, lament how the young are losing touch with their roots. But others see the potential for a fusion of old and new. The old spirits have not died, they say, and may be revived in new forms. After a century of churchgoing, says Claudine la Rose, “most people here are Christian like me, but also believe in the spirits.” So perhaps something new can emerge that includes the best of both worlds. Young women in particular are a growing force to be reckoned with in their village communities. Felix, with her bushcraft and IT skills, exemplifies that.

There are other signs of a new accommodation between the old and new. Like many traditional communities round the world, the Wapichan are working hard and effectively to preserve their language, which is more widely spoken in Guyana than most Amerindian tongues. Only around a tenth of the Wapichan people can read and write the language, but older people speak it among themselves.

Traditions are also connected to the many skills that remain in the villages. Villagers still slaughter their own animals for meat; they make cassava and tapioca bread from local ingredients, as well as wine, jams and a pungent pepper sauce – usually sold in old vodka bottles. They make their own leather, too, and every village has a carpenter and sewing circles, where women turn cotton into their traditional hammocks and baby slings.

“It is hard to keep the skills, especially findings youths willing to be trained and to work in the villages,” says Tony James. He wants to introduce holiday summer classes in bushcraft for children from secondary schools. “We should teach them how to make bows and arrows, how to survive in the forest and how to hunt. At the end of the course, they could go into the forest on their own and prove their prowess in finding food, and then return with what they have hunted or gathered to prepare a village feast. The young women could welcome the hunters. There could be a bushcraft graduation ceremony. We could even fly in tourists to watch.”



Photo: Tom Griffiths

Is that wishful thinking? The world of the Wapichan is certainly changing. The question is whether it will change in ways that they decide, or as a result of outside forces over which they have no control. Land, and their rights and collective spiritual attachment to it will almost certainly be central to the outcome. Perhaps the attachment to land is losing out to computer games, canned vegetables and the lure of cash. But just maybe modern technology, and the global links it can bring, will take them on a different road. **A road on which digital mapping and global advocacy can secure their land rights for future generations.**



Photo: Tom Griffiths



Photo: Tom Griffiths



Mother forest

Photo: Tom Griffiths

The Wapichan come from the forest and many still feel most at home there. Patrick Gomes' pride and joy is his swidden farm just inside the forest east of Marora Naawa. He is from the Arawak tribe in the northwest of the country, and moved to the south at the age of 17, first to teach and then to farm and to fight for the land. He is now in his 60s, and the forest remains his secret world. He took me to see.

Driving up to the forest edge along ancient Wapichan trails, we pass the deserted airstrip. Then we spot three women heading for their fields. They carry wicker baskets, and one is riding a bullock. In the distance is a man with a bow and arrow, on his way to distant hunting grounds. In among the trees, we wade a stream where a large anaconda was recently found digesting its prey. Gomes points out the straight-stemmed plants still used to make arrows, then wild bananas by the path and some medicinal plants, before reaching his cassava field.

Swidden farmers employ shifting cultivation, often pejoratively known as slash-and-burn farming, as if it were a blight on the land. But properly done it is not, he says. Farmers like him cultivate plots for a year or two and then move on, leaving the land fallow to recover. Vegetation grows here rapidly. He points out last year's abandoned fields, which already contain rich undergrowth above head high. "I leave a 15-20-year fallow. By then it is indistinguishable from the canopy forest around."

Nature certainly likes it here. There are no anacondas to greet us, but the forest around is alive with sound, and while we walk on to Gomes's peanut field, two macaws rise into the sky. Later, as we turn to go, we check the GPS. After interrogating passing satellites for several minutes, it finally gets its bearings. We are at 2 degrees and 43.98 North, and 59 degrees and 7.613 West, "accurate to within five metres".



Patrick Gomes and his swidden farm east of Marora Naawa

Photo: Fred Pearce

Mobilising to Secure Wapichan Territory

There is a growing movement to ensure that indigenous peoples and other communities round the world can obtain legal title to their traditional lands. This includes reclaiming areas leased out to foreign farmers and miners, as well as land “protected” by governments for conservation.

The case for gaining title, and resuming control, of such protected lands has been strengthened by growing evidence that community forests -- such as the one the Wapichan want to create -- hold more carbon and suffer less deforestation than conventionally protected areas.

A 2014 report from the Washington DC-based World Resources Institute and the Rights and Resources Initiative found in a review of 130 studies in countries from Brazil to Papua New Guinea that community control leads to better conservation and sustainable use outcomes. Just over the border from Guyana, in the Brazilian Amazon, it found that since 2000, forests under indigenous control had lost just 0.6 per cent of their trees, compared to 7 per cent outside.

This research backs up a growing emphasis on customary sustainable use of natural resources in implementing the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. The convention's Aichi targets, adopted in 2010, include the aim that: “By 2020, the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention with the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities, at all relevant levels.” In October 2014, the CBD adopted a Plan of Action for Customary Sustainable Use of biodiversity, with the aim of supporting community initiatives at the local level and helping to meet its global target quoted above.

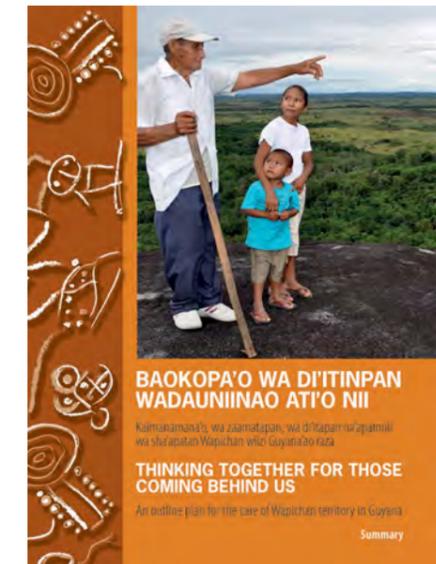
Other UN agencies have taken up the cause, including the UN Environment Programme, whose World Conservation Monitoring Centre maintains a register of indigenous and community-conserved areas. And the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at the World Parks Congress in November 2014 launched its Whakatane Mechanism aimed at “redressing the effects of historic and current injustices against indigenous people in the name of conservation...” and ensuring that the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities are fully respected in conservation projects on the ground.

The case will be heard in a number of international forums in late 2015-16. They include:

- Meetings of the Convention on Biological Diversity addressing implementation of commitments on traditional knowledge and customary sustainable use (in June and November 2015 and May and December 2016).
- The UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France (from 30 November to 11 December 2015).

Baokopa’o wa di’itinpan wadauniinao ati’o nii (Thinking together for those coming behind us)

After years of painstaking work and multiple community consultations, the indigenous Wapichan people of southern Guyana have set out agreements and proposals for caring for their territory in a ground-breaking plan titled Baokopa’o wa di’itinpan wadauniinao ati’o nii (Thinking together for those coming behind us). This innovative grass-roots effort has resulted in more than one hundred inter-community agreements on sustainable land use, including proposals to establish an extensive Wapichan



Conserved Forest over old-growth rainforest in the eastern part of their territory. Discussions and agreements also involved documenting a community vision for community land use, livelihood and culture in Wapichan Wiizi (Wapichan territory) in 25 years' time.

“In another generation our communities will continue to preserve the forest, bush islands, sacred places and cultural heritage sites. Key resources like pokoridi and ité palms will be protected and abundant. Some of our resources will have been increased, including replenishment and planting of useful plants, trees and medicines. Our children and youths will be well educated, employed in Wapichan wiizi, be respectful of our culture and will have taken up the challenge as future leaders.”
[Wapichan woman elder, Shizizi, 2010]

Key contents of the territorial plan are summarised in a brochure. This includes examples of agreements made between villages on ways to secure and care for their lands, forests, savannahs, wetlands and mountains and promote self-determined development in Wapichan communities.

The full management plan document is available to download from:
www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2012/05/wapichan-mp-22may12lowresnomarks.pdf
To order a printed copy (price: £14.99) please email info@forestpeoples.org

It is hoped that the experience of the Wapichan people will be of interest to indigenous peoples in other parts of Guyana and in other countries.

The Wapichan people and their representative organisations are now seeking partners to help them take their plan forward to secure their traditional lands and realise their vision for their territory.



Where They Stand

Author: Fred Pearce

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In memory of Samson (Samo) Issacs of Potarinau Village, South Central Rupununi, Guyana. Samo passed away in February 2015. He had worked as a committed member of the community land use monitoring project since 2013. He was a brave and committed Wapichan who saw securing legal recognition of Wapichan lands and natural resources as the way to the survival of the Wapichan people and their way of life. May he rest in peace.