

The Wapichan in Guyana

The Wapichan people live in the south west part of Guyana in an area of 2.8 million hectares of which 1.4 million hectares is forest (Wales is 2 million hectares). The area is a rich variety of rainforests, mountains, and different types of land. There are 9000 people in 21 communities who make a living from small farms, hunting, fishing and gathering food, which is how they have lived in the area for a very long time.



Problems the community faces:

The Wapichan people have lived in this area for hundreds of years. Until recently they did not need documents proving that they had a right to the land but now they have to convince the government that it is Wapichan land as they need the right to keep other people out.

The government has allowed companies to set up mines in the area without asking the Wapichan about it.

People from outside come in to mine gold and also cut down trees to sell the timber. The method of gold mining pollutes land and water with poisonous chemicals as well as clearing the land of trees. Their area is huge and people can do

a lot of damage before anything is done to stop them. Most of the gold miners are breaking the law.

The Wapichan people worry that the younger people will lose the traditional knowledge of how to live with the forest.

Their own words are –

“The situation is getting worse and threats are increasing. This is why we have decided to watch over our lands and forests, and to get organised to collect and publish information to tell the world what is going on.”

Toshao Geneve Thomas, elected leader of Awarewao Village adds:

“We need the country and the world to know what is happening here on our land, which is vital to our identity, livelihood and way of living. The trees cannot speak out, the birds, animals and wildlife cannot say stop! The fishes are defenceless as their homes and spawning grounds are destroyed. Who will speak for them? We want to stop hurtful mining. We will not allow it on our lands.”

The Wapichan know that their “Mother Forest” cools the local climate and brings rainfall to the region.

“We make our living from our mother forest. She provides us with all the things we need. She is like our storehouse. And the trees give us clean air to breathe. The bush contains sacred areas, old settlement sites, ceremonial grounds of our forefathers. Those places are special to us.”

What they want to do

The Wapichan communities want to create one of the world’s largest community forests over 1.4 million hectares, where they plan to stop things like mining and look after habitats that are important for wildlife, game animals, birds and fish. The villages have agreed that they will still be able to hunt, fish, and harvest construction materials and bush medicines within the conserved forest according

to custom and village rules on how to use resources without destroying them for the future.

Deforestation is reduced in areas where local communities who have been living with the forest for centuries are given rights to their land.

What's the project doing?

Supporting the Wapichan in collecting evidence that they have lived there for centuries and that they use the forest without damaging it. This evidence is needed to make their case to the government of Guyana.

Project support includes advice and training on the law.

The Project helps to build schools to make a space in the forest where the older people with traditional knowledge and skills can pass those on to the young people. They want people to feel that they are part of a Wapichan community with its own language and way of life. They also want to improve the respect between the youth and the older people.

The Project is training community members in the use of GPS and smart phones to collect data about their territory including the damage that illegal mining and logging is causing to their forests

How Successful is it so far:

The GPS and smart phone training and use of a drone has meant they can make a record of their land and keep an eye on what outsiders are doing when they come in. They are using all the information they are collecting to make records and maps of their lands. They have also set up their own website.

<http://wapichanao.communitylands.org/>



If they see with the drone that people have come in and are starting to dig up the land for mining they can contact government bodies who can come and stop it.

They built the drone themselves.

<https://sizeofwales.org.uk/wapichan-we-built-a-drone/>



They now have an agreement with the government to try to stop mining that is very damaging and many mines have been closed down.

They also have an agreement that they have a right to have a local government. They recently (2018) met with President Granger and presented him with a document explaining

the Wapichan hopes for the protection of their ancestral lands.

They have run a youth summit for the Wapichan young people.
<https://sizeofwales.org.uk/guyanas-youth-summit-conference/>



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