

The Iwokrama brand and climate change

- Prince Charles gathers supporters

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IWOKRAMA patron, Prince Charles, will hold a global meeting next month to highlight the Centre's goals and draw on international support for the forest conservation initiative as it seeks to play a more meaningful role in the global climate change debate.

Iwokrama, set up more than ten years ago has two main battles: getting money to run its programmes, and even more grave, getting attention. In trying to win on both these fronts, Iwokrama underscores its relevance in the world climate change debate.

"As the implications of climate change become ever more apparent, the international community looks towards institutions such as the Iwokrama International Centre to demonstrate, through scientific research, education and local community relations that it is possible to achieve environmental sustainability and social responsibility without recourse to actions that may cause profound ecological damage to the world," the Prince of Wales is quoted by Iwokrama as saying.

Former United Kingdom High Commissioner to Guyana Mr Edward Glover is not shy to admit that Iwokrama has been hidden from the people of Guyana and the rest of the world. Glover is in his last year as chairman of the international Board of Trustees that manages the Iwokrama Centre, which aims to demonstrate that money can be made from forests, without destroying it.

The Minister of Education Dr. Desrey Fox at a recent meeting of the Iwokrama Board said that she would seek to work with Iwokrama to get Guyanese schoolchildren to know about Iwokrama and its work.

President Bharrat Jagdeo has stressed upon Iwokrama the importance of Guyana playing its part in the international climate change debate. This comes as Guyana braces for torrential downpours of the May/June rainy season which many get nervous about when remembering the floods which killed over 20 and destroyed the livelihood of thousands on the coastland in 2005.

The unusual rainfall was as a result of changing weather patterns the authorities believe and the government recently reinvigorated the National Climate Committee. In addition, through a motion taken to the 65-seat National Assembly in mid-March this year, the Parliament of Guyana agreed to examine the possibility of setting up a National Commission on Climate Change and Mitigating Measures to make recommendations and monitor actions which must be taken to address the situation.

Opposition parliamentarian James McAllister said sea level rise coupled with an increase in destructive storms will threaten the existence of small island states and low lying communities.

He posited that since more than 90 per cent of Guyana's population live on the coastland, which also accommodates a vast majority of the country's agricultural and economic activities, global warming would have a "significant impact on Guyana."

Minister of Agriculture Mr. Robert Persaud, speaking in the National Assembly during the debate on the motion warned that the El Nino Southern Oscillation phenomenon that brings extreme

weather impacts to Guyana is evidence of a changing climate and the forecast is of an 85 per cent probability of an El Nino event this year that is likely to produce drought-like conditions.

According to Glover, the International Board of Trustees has pledged, through facilities available at Iwokrama, to ensure the Centre is an important element "in this process of responding to climate change through mitigation and adaptation."

Glover, in an interview with the Guyana Chronicle, said the board of trustees is taking seriously the President's charge to highlight Iwokrama in the global discussions on climate change.

"Protecting and enhancing (the Iwokrama) forest, a home to the people who live there and treasury to some of the world's endangered species is our major contribution to the Commonwealth's response to climate change", President Jagdeo has been quoted as saying.

Glover noted that Iwokrama's Trustees, particularly those in London have been working hard to secure sponsorship and support from major UK companies who are committed to corporate social responsibility with an emphasis on climate change.

By the end of the year, the establishment of a climate change monitoring unit will commence at Iwokrama's management centre at Kurupukari thanks to the good offices of University of New Castle.

The Commonwealth Secretary General Don Mckinnon has welcomed Iwokrama's new plan for greater partnership with the institutions and investors who are committed to playing their own part in responding to climate change.

The scientific community believes that the global climate is warming because of greenhouse gas emissions from human activities, including industrial and manufacturing processes, fossil fuel combustion (gas) and changes in land use, such as deforestation.

The U.S. and Australia have refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol which sets legally-binding targets for developed countries to reduce greenhouse emissions within seven years, to about five per cent below 1990 levels.

The Kyoto Protocol is the first international agreement to fight global warming. It was signed by 141 nations, including all European and all other developed industrial nations except the U.S. and Australia.

The pact went into effect on February 16, 2005, and expires in 2012. The Kyoto Protocol has been celebrated by its backers as a lifeline to save our planet from disastrous human-caused effects of a warming global climate.

In Guyana, the National Climate Committee was first set up in 1995 with the primary responsibility to decide on policies and projects relating to climate change, and was intended to determine appropriate mechanisms and personnel for implementing and managing climate change projects and for the allocation of available funds.

Guyana's carbon dioxide removal levels exceed emission under the Kyoto Protocol and it is classified as a Non-Annex. As such, Guyana is not legally required to reduce emission like many other countries.

The Government Information Agency (GINA) said focus is currently on developing cleaner sources of fuel with the construction of a co-generation plant at Skeldon in Berbice while bio-diesel is being explored by the Institute of Applied Science and Technology (IAST).

The government is focused on establishing a Climate Change Unit in the Hydrometeorological Service of the Ministry of Agriculture to act as a precursor to the development of a Climate Change Centre.

GINA stated that the NCC's revised terms of reference are to examine national conditions relating to climate change and to make recommendations to the Adviser to the President on Science, Technology, Energy and Environment, and relevant ministries on appropriate national measures to address the conditions.

It will advise on developments and the needs for policies and regulations in relation to activities responding to climate change and promote technical, scientific, technological and financial cooperation among organizations/agencies dealing with climate change issues, the agency said.

Monitoring the implementation of national policies, programmes and action plans related to climate change and making recommendations for appropriate changes and revisions are other functions of the NCC, it said.

Although the NCC was in existence for two years, the experience of El Nino and La Nina in 1997 heightened Guyana's awareness of climate change and the committee became an important component to address and assist in adaptation measures.

In 1996 La Nina caused heavy downpours, resulting in widespread flooding in all regions of Guyana, many areas having to be evacuated with the attendant losses of millions of dollars.

The 1997-1998 El Nino effect brought drought to the country. Many areas were declared disaster areas, brought on by forest fires and salt water intrusion into major rivers, affecting the extraction of irrigation water and loss of crops was widespread in many areas.

Sea level rise affects Guyana's coastal defense as the coast is about 1.2m below sea level, meaning that defenses are necessary to keep out the tidal surges that are sometimes in excess of 2m. Guyana experiences tidal surges that are sometimes in excess of 3m at high spring tide. Inundation of low lying areas is often caused by overtopping, breaches of sea defences and erosion of the near shore area due to shifts of ocean currents due to wind changes.

Minister Persaud has outlined a number of adaptation strategies being pursued by the government, including increasing the network of data collection stations to guide decision making, such as the redesign of drainage channels to facilitate the higher intensity of rainfall being experienced.

Another measure, he said, is the design and construction of sea defenses to accommodate the projection of sea level rise. He pointed out that the "rip rap" design of the "sea wall" allows for the raising of defenses to prevent overtopping.

He said research into "disease resistant, high yielding" crops to flower and produce within the season is also being pursued. He further pointed out that management plans are being developed in the fisheries, forestry and mining sectors to accommodate climate change impacts.

Further, he said the government is developing and promoting the use of renewable energy, such as wind, hydropower, and solar, to further reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

Meeting its goal

The Iwokrama Forest is zoned into two sections; a wilderness preserve, and a Sustainable Utilisation Area, which allows for sustainable use activities, conservation and evaluating the impacts of such activities on an intact forest.

The experiment, for which Iwokrama was created, that of showing how tropical forests can be conserved and sustainably used to provide ecological, social and economic benefits to local, national and international communities, is finally underway. Glover says this experiment, Iwokrama's business venture in sustainable timber harvesting, will test the proposition that conservation, environmental balance and economically sustainable activities are "not contradictions, but neutrally enforcing."

The concept of Iwokrama was born in 1989, when Guyana said it wanted to make available to the commonwealth an area of land to carry out the fundamental experiment to determine if tropical rainforests, vital to life continuity on earth, can be conserved, but at the same time utilized to the benefit of people.

The offer by Guyana came amidst growing anxiety about climate change, global warming, and its impact on sea level rise in the Caribbean.

The timber harvesting venture is being developed through financing from Timber is Iwokrama's primary business initiative and has largely been developed through funding from the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO).

The five year plan, which can be renewed, has the communities as shareholders, reflecting the relationship that they have with the Iwokrama Forest.

Through the timber operations, not more than 20,000 cubic metres per annum could be harvested by the private sector company, Tigerwood Guyana Incorporated.

A monocyclic silvicultural system that involves felling only a few of the commercial trees in an area (selective logging) will be employed, utilizing a 60-year cutting cycle.

Reduced Impact Logging techniques requires much more planning than conventional techniques, but results in a more efficient, cost effective operation on the ground, as well as less impact on the environment and surrounding forest.

Upon completion of harvesting activities, felling blocks will be closed down and the environment directly affected will be rehabilitated to the extent that is practicable.

Iwokrama and the joint venture company managing the timber harvesting plan is implementing practices which are in accord with the Guyana National Initiative for Forest Certification (GNIFC), National Standards for Forest Management (such as the Code of Practice and other GFC requirements) and those of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), to conserve and protect the ecosystem.

With this commitment, Iwokrama believes, ecosystem effects are predicted to be mainly temporary and acceptable.

According to Iwokrama, business operations will be based on detailed research and planning that included management and pre-harvest forest inventories; marketing and feasibility studies; and consultations with local communities and potential business partners.

Timber products such as Greenheart squares, prime and select construction material, flooring and molding will be directed toward green and socially responsible niche markets.

They will be branded with the Iwokrama name, which will indicate social, cultural, ecological and economic sustainability. Market conditions, low production volumes and high transportation costs will directly affect the determination of products.

Financial sustainability

The timber harvesting project is one of the means by which Iwokrama hopes to achieve financial sustainability by 2010.

A five year business plan (2006-10) will hopefully see the center being able to chalk up the US\$600, 000 it needs to meet operational costs.

At the moment, the Centre gets support from the Government of Guyana, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the International Tropical Timber Organization, the German government and other donors.

The Iwokrama Centre came into operation in 1996 on the basis of an agreement between the Commonwealth and Government of Guyana, and after included in the Laws of Guyana, the agreement paved the way for the establishment of an international board of trustees to manage the nearly one million acre (371,000 hectares) rainforest.

Glover says at the heart of the business initiatives of Iwokrama is tourism, owing to the rich biodiversity that Iwokrama possesses.

He admits that in the past, Iwokrama lacked the expertise in marketing, and hence Iwokrama remained "in the jungle", hidden from Guyana and the world over.

Now, however, through arrangements with UK companies Glover would only at this time call "big", that will hopefully change, and there will be "well packaged" initiatives to sell Iwokrama.

Glover issues high praises to President Jagdeo and his government for constructing an airstrip at Iwokrama that now makes access to the rainforest much more convenient.

However, it is still far too expensive for locals, and hence Glover is encouraging them to come to visit Iwokrama overland.

Iwokrama forest's ecosystem is located at a crossroads between Amazonian and Guianan flora and fauna. As a result, it contains high species richness and several species of animals that are threatened or extinct across most of their former geographic ranges, like the Giant Anteater.

The Iwokrama forest has the highest species richness for fish (over 420 described so far) and bats (90) for any area this size in the world. It also has extraordinarily high bird diversity (over 500). Additionally Iwokrama Forest has also been identified as a global hotspot for several plant families, including Lecythidaceae and Chrysobalanaceae.

Working with communities

Glover says too that another story often not told is of Iwokrama's partnership with local communities, which he sees as unique.

Iwokrama currently employs 70 members of staff, of which 70 per cent are the Amerindian residents of the surrounding communities.

The Iwokrama forest is in the Makushi homeland. The Makushi people are one of the last remaining Amerindian tribes who are the original settlers of Guyana.

From very early in its history, Iwokrama focused on building strong participatory mechanisms and partnerships the indigenous communities of the North Rupununi District that adjoins the forest.

Iwokrama was instrumental in the formation of the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB). The Board represents the communities and takes responsibility for the planning and coordination of many Iwokrama educational, developmental, cultural and research programmes in the North Rupununi.

Iwokrama seeks to make this a model partnership that other forest managers and owners may replicate with local peoples.

The NRDDB, established in 1996, is a locally formed Amerindian community-based organisation composed of village leaders and other community representatives.

The Board was created by Iwokrama to establish a formal link between the communities, government agencies, and Iwokrama.

According to Sydney Allicock, a Makushi from the village of Surama, the NRDDB is progressing as a fairly successful initiative by the Makushi people to take control of their resources and developmental processes.

Iwokrama, he said, has affected the residents of the North Rupununi in positive ways.

Allicock noted that Iwokrama started as a political vision that did not take into account the "views, fears, hopes, or interests" of the Makushi people whose lands and sacred and spiritual values, as well as modern aspirations were at stake.

Also, at the start, only two communities, Fairview, and Allicock's own, Surama, were listed to receive benefits from the venture and suspicions grew.

Though the NRDDB was set up in 1996, it was only until 2002 that an Amerindian representative began to sit on the Iwokrama Board of Trustees.

The NRDDB has undertaken some unique initiatives, including them the establishment of the Bina Hill Institute at Annai, which among other things seeks the revival of the Makushi language.

A group of women, who barely completed primary school, pioneered the use of solar powered portable computers to record data, draft texts, and translate their booklets on fishes, birds, cassava, the Iwokrama Mountains and the traditional and modern uses of alcohol. Sale of these books has brought in significant finances for the group.

Today, through the accomplishments of the Bina Hill Institute, the Makushi language is now being taught in schools in the North Rupununi through the support of the Ministry of Education. '

In additions, through the NRDDDB, youths, are taking an active role in conservation. There are Wildlife Clubs in most if not all of the communities of the North Rupununi.

Every year, the wildlife clubs hosts a festival. The events include archery, cotton-spinning and a quiz competition.

Another effort with which Iwokrama has involved the communities is in the construction of an canopy walkway in the Iwokrama forest.

The Iwokrama canopy walkway is managed on behalf of Iwokrama International Centre by Community and Tourism Services Inc (CATS). CATS is a unique partnership formed between the Makushi community at Surama and two private sector businesses: Rock View Lodge and Wilderness Explorers. CATS plans to make this partnership a model of how ecotourism can be financially successful and provide real benefits and ownership to local communities.

The company is equally owned by the three principals and current Chairman of the Board is Sydney Allicock from Surama.

With all these initiatives, Glover sees Iwokrama poised to meet its mission of "promoting the conservation and the sustainable and equitable use of tropical rain forests in a manner that leads to lasting ecological, economic, and social benefits to the people of Guyana and to the world in general, by undertaking research, training, and the development and dissemination of technologies."