

Iwokrama's message has not been getting through

New Chairman Edward Glover talks to Stabroek News

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The Iwokrama canopy walkway

Since its foundation a decade ago Iwokrama has established its stature as a major research body in the field of tropical forests. Its work is well known in the UK and Europe and North America. Moreover it has attracted donor funding and other assistance from a wide spread of international agencies and bodies. Mr Edward Glover, former British High Commissioner to Guyana was recently appointed Chairman. Stabroek News invited his comments on the points raised below:

SN: While Iwokrama has always been strongly supported by successive Guyana governments it is still hardly known by the Guyanese people. Indeed there is a prevailing image of it as an international entity which is the preserve of foreign experts. Isn't there a case for a sustained effort to make it better known to the Guyanese people and indeed within Caricom states.

EG: Yes, there is a strong case for making Iwokrama better known to the Guyanese people and to Caricom. We need their support but we won't get it if they don't know enough about what we are doing. We have a good story to tell but we need to tell it more effectively.

I say this because not enough people know how Iwokrama started, where it is and what it does. Not enough people know that the Iwokrama rainforest is part of one of only four intact tropical rainforest areas remaining in the world. Not enough people know that Iwokrama has contributed significantly over the years to scientific research on conservation and sustainable forestry management; and that the field

station at Kurupukari has played a major role in this process. Not enough people know that Iwokrama has a strong relationship with neighbouring communities, as I saw for myself in October; nor do they know that this positive relationship demonstrates Iwokrama's strong commitment to the principle of co-management. And not enough people know that Iwokrama has various business activities, such as ranger training programmes.

Hampered in recent years by a hand-to-mouth financial existence, an unfocused agenda and poor self-promotion, Iwokrama has struggled to make its public mark, even in Guyana. We have not done enough to impress others in the highly competitive international environmental funding market place. As a consequence, without adequate funding, our message has not been getting through nationally, or to Caricom, or for that matter internationally.



The field station

This is not good enough. We have to be much more persuasive at winning support based on results. We need to meet the high expectations of the Government and retain the trust of those international institutions, which have supported us in the past. Our aim now is to lead with a positive and active agenda, not hide behind the trees for which we are responsible. Those who have supported us deserve no less.

We are now doing just that. The IIC is under new management - it has its first Guyanese Director General, supported by a young, energetic and committed staff - and it has embarked on an aggressive new approach to put Iwokrama centre stage domestically and abroad. This is the right time to do this, as the international community becomes increasingly preoccupied with the need to adopt measures to reverse climate change. Iwokrama is determined to make its voice heard at this critical time.

SN: We have also noticed that although Iwokrama is primarily concerned with providing a model for the utilisation of tropical forests while at the same time conserving them, Iwokrama seems to have failed to attract the

interest of experts, research students and institutes from the countries with such forests. This is a gap which it is considered, especially in view of the recognition accorded to Iwokrama by Commonwealth Heads in Malta, that the Commonwealth Secretariat and its related agencies could assist in filling.

EG: Many people may not know that in recent years a significant number of scientists have come to Iwokrama to do a wide range of important research. Their work has been of a high standard. We now want to build on this strong foundation by attracting more of the best and the brightest scientists to work with us to provide a model for sustainable forestry management and conservation in response, for example, to the discussions at the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

These scientists and other experts will help us, through their work and its publication, to ensure that Iwokrama's voice becomes more widely known. There will be other developments to underline our role. I would like to specify three.

First, as I said in Georgetown at the end of October, we intend to put to the practical test the proposition that sustainable forestry works. This was Iwokrama's original mandate and we need to get on with it. There is no point just talking about it. We want to join with others across the world in seeing if environmental sustainability and social responsibility can indeed go hand in hand with economic progress.

Accordingly, the Director General will announce soon in more detail how this will be done. But what I can tell you now is that this process - which will take place in the sustainable utilisation area of the rainforest only - will be open to international observers, will be accountable and will be validated by international experts, including ProForest. The Guyana Forestry Commission will be a partner too, as we will be testing their guidelines and practices. The scientific results will be analysed and shared with all those committed to finding solutions to global warming.

Not harvesting is frankly not an option. We were given a research mandate and we should complete it. Iwokrama wants to pull its weight in the international climate change debate through research and, in so doing, put Guyana centre stage. There will be full consultation and partnership with the local communities during the entire harvesting process. We will continue to pay close attention to their livelihoods: combining their way of life with improved economic advancement.

The second step is just as important. Iwokrama needs to become financially self-sufficient, if it is to attract the expertise we want.

Donor priorities have changed. The IIC can no longer rely on funding from a handful of governments, as in the past. They have other pressures to which they must respond. Instead, the IIC will seek partnerships with others working on sustainable development issues, on the basis of shared environmental purpose - in other words working with others publicly committed to the reversal of climate change. These partnerships might be in the form of the loan of personnel, or technical participation using Iwokrama's available and tested scientific facilities or longer-term financial support.

The search for these new partnerships has already started in London and elsewhere. We are focusing on financial institutions, universities and the corporate sector, in order to find quality long-term sustainable asset support for Iwokrama's unique rainforest, along with quality scientific research partners. We will be looking internationally, not confining ourselves to any particular area or group.

The third step is to be much more professional in the way we promote Iwokrama. We want to make the rainforest an internationally recognised centre of excellence for scientists and researchers; a place of beauty, enjoyment and ecological intrigue for tourists from around the world interested in the preservation of rainforests; and a place of curiosity for Guyanese children and those in the region and beyond.

One of our objectives is to add to our website a virtual rainforest, so that the younger generation will be able to see how important Iwokrama is to Guyana and the international community. The search is already on for a donor to bring this to fruition.

The media in Guyana and beyond, together with our plans to develop Friends of Iwokrama in the United States and elsewhere, will be a very important component in our efforts to keep the Centre in the public eye.

All this will take time and effort but we are determined to end Iwokrama's recent years of isolation.

SN: It is considered that the time is now ripe to endeavour, through Guyana and Caricom diplomacy, to 'locate,' so to speak, Iwokrama's activities within the context of climate change and the Kyoto Protocol, especially as such widened interest could open new sources of donor financing.

Indeed the Commonwealth Summit in Malta discussed Iwokrama in the context of climate change.

EG: The time is indeed ripe to place Iwokrama's activities in the context of

climate change and the Kyoto Protocol.

I believe that we can do this by taking the steps I have just outlined, and indeed others, to put Iwokrama at the heart of the international climate change debate. We have a unique rainforest, we have the scientific infrastructure in place and we have a committed Guyanese team. I regard that as a good basis for what we want to achieve. But we cannot succeed entirely on our own.

President Jagdeo gave us invaluable and much needed support last year for which I am deeply grateful. That contribution has greatly helped to underpin our new direction. We look to the Government to continue to proclaim our cause and reputation regionally and internationally, as I am sure they will.

We are receiving important practical support and encouragement from the Commonwealth Secretariat, which we deeply appreciate. They support our current efforts in London and elsewhere to put Iwokrama on to a much more stable and self-sufficient long-term financial basis through wider collaboration with international institutions and corporations.

I hope that for its part Caricom will do all that it can to recognise and support Iwokrama's contribution to climate change research. The IIC has an important task to fulfil, as the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government communique emphasised. But Iwokrama is also a regional asset. Its future success will not only put Guyana at the heart of efforts to reverse climate change but bring much kudos to the Caribbean as a whole.

All this effort will come at a cost. The international market place for financial support is highly competitive, as I have already said, but we intend to be in that market in the months ahead, pressing as hard as we can for the resources we need on the basis of our achievements so far and what we believe we can deliver in the future.

Only those with a clear and compelling message succeed. But I hope that, as we carry out our work in the months ahead with greater self-promotion, there will be increasing interest in assisting us. What I have found already is that many institutions already know about the IIC and indeed may decide to work with us, once they are sure about our agenda and supporting strategy.

I hope that in the foreseeable future people will come knocking on our door to offer help, rather than us knock on their door.

SN: There appears to be a strong case for updating the membership of

Iwokrama's Board in view of its current and projected activities and the considerations contained above.

EG: All organisations have to keep on their toes in this challenging and competitive world. The IIC is no exception. We will be looking in the months ahead at the way we do our work and comparing ourselves with others. We need to compete with the best.

To be successful, we have to be increasingly effective and hard working and be highly professional in the way we promote ourselves. We have already started to look in a critical way at how to improve. The IIC's greatest asset is its staff - in Georgetown and in the field - and the many others who work with them. As Chairman, I am determined to do all I can to enhance this asset.

The Board of Trustees, on which I am delighted the Government and the Commonwealth Secretariat are represented, will review the IIC's progress when it meets in Georgetown in the next few months. It will also look closely at its own role. I hope that this will be the opportunity to fill a number of vacant positions on the Board with international experts with a wide range of professional skills to reinforce the Board's work. A strong board will in turn reinforce the efforts of the Director General and his team.

All of us associated with Iwokrama are committed to ensuring that we move rapidly and with purpose to enhance the IIC's international reputation hidden for so long.