



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **GOOD SCIENCE ESSENTIAL BUT NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOOD POLICY**

At the launch of Mining Week at the Umana Yana yesterday, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and the Guyana Geology & Mines Commission (GGMC) provided a re-assuring display of their technical capacity to combat wanton destruction of forests and rivers. The demonstration of cutting-edge technology from a range of young Guyanese professionals showed a capacity to account for every tree in the forests and every dredge on the rivers. Policy Forum Guyana congratulates both Agencies on this imaginative outreach to the wider community.

Another curtain-raiser for Mining Week was the welcome announcement from the MNR of its intention to make acquisition of mercury more difficult. While this will, hopefully, reduce Guyana's current free-for-all it falls some way short of the robust commitment to eliminate mercury within a realistic time-frame.

At the invitation of the Guyana Forestry Commission invitees held a minute's silence for the incalculable damage to air quality, trees and water eco-services by the fires in the Brazilian Amazon. Thanks to the same science, we know that half a billion trees have been destroyed in the Amazon this year including a massive spike in the past three months.

The point of good science is to provide reliable evidence for good policy and while Guyana is moving in the right direction our pace is too leisurely, ambivalent and insufficiently purposeful. In addressing the climate crisis time is of the essence, not something we can eventually get around to. Science, however sophisticated, is not a substitute for good policy.

Two weeks ago the media carried a complaint by the South Rupununi District Council of two dredges sited on the Kuyuwini river, one of the headwaters tributaries of the Essequibo river. In response the relevant Government agencies (MNR and GGMC) lamented their inability to take action because there was no evidence the dredges were breaking any laws.

The legal position is that no mining licenses are to be issued below the 4th parallel of latitude was Gazetted by Prime Minister Hinds in 2011. Moreover, there is only one reason for taking the trouble to haul the parts of a dredge to a remote river, and it's safe to speculate it's not to play dominoes. Moreover, the hauling and building of the dredges also required the use of indigenous landings and labour.

If the national policy were simply to ban river mining nationwide once current licences run out, there would be no excuse for what President Granger has referred to as ‘dreadful dragga dredges’ being on any rivers in the country.

Fresh water will be more valuable than oil in a surprisingly short time as global supplies (already down to 1% of all water on the planet) continue to shrink. On World Environment Day two months ago, President Granger committed his government to eliminating the use of mercury and reducing the negative impact of mining on rivers. *“The Guiana Shield, he stated, with 15% of the world’s freshwater reserves – is a global resource. It provides environmental services such as the regulation of the water cycle, water quality and pollination”*

The lack of firm action to protect fresh water resources – the most valuable long-term natural resource Guyana possesses – is short-sighted. Guyana is committed to eliminate mercury use by 2027 – by a special dispensation of the Minamata Convention which stipulates 2020. By 2027 the Kuyuwini and all of Guyana’s great rivers will be irrevocably poisoned by mercury. All the great rivers of Guyana, the Puruni, the Mazaruni, the Cayuni, the Potaro, Essequibo, Demerara are being sacrificed to extraction. The cost to these arteries of Guyana has to be calculated in terms not only of quality of human life but also extinction of wildlife, fish stocks and bio-diversity. The cost is incalculable.

Moreover, this latest complaint comes two months after the statement made by the President of Guyana stressing the fact that *“protection of our forests and the Shield’s biodiversity help to protect planet earth. We are part of that global resource”*.

Other countries such as Colombia, New Zealand and India are all developing more robust approaches to environmental protection, including extending legal personality to rivers and appointing river guardians to enforce these laws.

A fundamental re-assessment is required of the regulatory and legal policies governing river protection , encompassing all relevant Agencies along with indigenous communities.

**Policy Forum Guyana**  
**August 24, 2019**