



Press statement

Time to place North Rupununi Wetlands protection on front burner

Recent calls by North Rupununi communities for adjustments to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)-funded Sustainable Agricultural Development Program must be heeded and steps taken to address their concerns. On March 19, 2018, IDB representatives and high-level government officials met with residents at Nappi during which several issues were raised including the construction of a massive reservoir in the middle of the portal that links the Essequibo and Amazon watersheds during the rainy season. Understandably, residents are concerned about the impacts on the wetlands and the range of biodiversity it supports, and upon which they depend.

It is encouraging that the IDB has undertaken to provide the residents with more information and has promised greater involvement of residents moving forward. However, it is worrying that it was only when residents passionately spoke up about their concerns at the Nappi meeting that the abovementioned decisions were made. It is noteworthy that since last year, the IDB recognised that consultations done during project preparation were 'not meaningful'. In its own assessment, the IDB noted that one reason for this was that consultations for the agricultural research center in Region 9 were done considering Manari as the project site. However, the project site was subsequently shifted to Pirara, located approximately 40 km north of Manari. Because of this, main stakeholders such as the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB) and the 20 communities it represents, were not consulted.

The IDB also recognised that the construction of the reservoir might significantly convert and/or degrade a critical habitat due to its extension. Even at the original project site, the IDB recognised that the project is in the Rupununi wetlands, an area with high biodiversity value and which provides a range of ecosystem services to the over 8000 indigenous residents who live in and around the area. How project managers deal with the shift to an even more sensitive site remains unclear.

The value of the North Rupununi wetlands has been recognised by the people of the Region, who, for over two decades, have called for its special recognition and potential designation as a RAMSAR (Convention on water sites of international importance) site. However, official

pronouncements of support from successive governments notwithstanding, little has been done to make this a reality. More recently, alarmed at proposed plans to expand large-scale agriculture and other land use activities in the North Rupununi, the communities of the North Rupununi, in February 2017, presented to the government a position paper making a case for its protection. In June 2017, in a letter to President David Granger, the communities re-emphasized the urgent need to protect the wetlands.

They have proposed that the wetlands be declared an Area of Conservation Interest and the imposition of an immediate moratorium on the granting of new concessions or land-use permits for mining, commercial logging, industrial agriculture or any other activities incompatible with conservation in the said area. To date, despite expressions of support, little has been done to move this forward.

The North Rupununi Wetlands has been shaped over millennia into the world-renowned, biodiverse rich area it is today, and the importance of such areas are increasingly being recognised. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) recently highlighted that human destruction of nature is rapidly eroding the world's capacity to provide food, water and security to billions of people. Wetlands have been particularly hard-hit with 87% of wetlands lost globally in the last 300 years.

Residents of the North Rupununi recognise well the role of wetlands as important sources of recharging, filtering and storage of freshwater, thereby ensuring water security for the 20 communities and over 8000 inhabitants of the North Rupununi. Communities are dependent on this area for food, medicines, materials for building, cultural practices and cash incomes.

The government has been making all the right noises on the international front regarding protection of water resources. President Granger has recognised that the world's freshwater supplies are under threat with water stress increasing in many parts of the world. At the World Water Forum in Brasilia several days ago, the President called for conservation of water resources and the protection of the environment everywhere in order to maintain the integrity of the earth's rivers and lakes. Wetlands are important in this regard.

Extractive industries such as mining have already poisoned many of Guyana's rivers with mining effluent and already such activities are harming pristine areas in the Rupununi. Should this continue, the rivers of the Rupununi could end up destroyed as has already happened in other regions of Guyana. It is time that the government move beyond lip-service and implement the sustainable solutions proposed by the indigenous people of the area.

North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB)
Guyana Policy Forum
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