

Indigenous people from Guyana call for respect for their rights

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Indigenous people from Guyana call for respect for their rights and recognition of their traditional practices that protect the environment

(Curitiba, Brazil) Three indigenous leaders of the Wapichan people from Guyana have told an international gathering of governments and conservationists attending the eighth conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that they are already protecting their environment through their traditional land and resource use practices.

In a public presentation held on 27th March, the leaders said that these practices are under threat because land laws in Guyana do not protect their extensive and sustainable land use system, and national conservation policies fail to recognise the contribution of indigenous peoples to the maintenance of biological diversity. They also stressed that the new Amerindian Act, adopted in early 2006, does not provide sufficient protection. As Patrick Gomes, leader of Marora Naawa village from the South Rupununi region of Guyana explains:

"We have carried research into our traditional resource use with a team drawn from our own communities. They have found that the key to sustainability is the low intensity of our customary occupation and use of a wide area that we call *wa wiizi*: 'our territory'. This extensive territory sustains our way of life and our traditional practices. The government of Guyana ratified the CBD in 1994 and is required to protect the customary use of biological resources under article 10(c), but our traditional practices and ownership over our traditional lands are not fully recognised by the State. Therefore, our territory is not secure and is threatened by so-called national development policies that promote logging, mining, roads and infrastructure development. Freedom to practise our traditional livelihoods is even faces threats from protected area projects planned by the government and conservation NGOs."

The leaders told participants that the findings of their study have been backed up by a recent report this month issued by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which states that Guyana's laws do not properly protect the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional lands.

Key recommendations for improved implementation of CBD requirements for protection of customary use and traditional practices in Guyana, include the need to amend laws and policies, particularly through recognition of indigenous peoples' territorial rights and their extensive systems of traditional resource use. The leaders also made a strong plea for national and international support for their efforts to develop a territorial and sustainable use management plan.