

First Nations Vacations and the New Museum

Interview with Damon Corrie, Ceremonial Hereditary Chief of the Eagle Clan Lokono-Arawaks (Guyana & Barbados), Founder of the Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations, General Manager, First Nations Vacations & Autodidact Author and Historian.

ICOM News: How and when did you and the Pan-Tribal Confederacy get organised?

Damon Corrie: It began at the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of SIDS (Small Island Developing States) held in Barbados in 1994, where I met other Indigenous leaders and representatives from around the circum-Caribbean area; and the need for a united body not specific to any or just one nation-state was discussed. I started it myself officially with encouragement from Makushi Chief Eugene Isaac (of Guyana) with the name Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Amerindian Tribal Nations – originally the scope was the American Hemisphere, but it has since evolved into the Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations with a multi-racial worldwide scope... As far as I know, it is still the only global multi-racial Indigenous Confederacy in existence. My great-great grandfather was the last Hereditary Chief of our particular Eagle Clan Lokono-Arawaks in Guyana, the first native Chief there to unite Guyana tribes (Arawaks, Akawaio and Makushis) to wage war on a common adversary that existed at that time. The



Photo: Risée Chaderton

united tribes won a battle at Itanime Falls in Guyana in 1850. He had aimed to get more tribes with him, but died during the measles and smallpox epidemic, before his dream could be fulfilled. For communications and political reasons, the Pan-Tribal Confederacy is still based in Barbados, and from here I do travel quite a lot – some years a lot more than others.

IN: Since almost a decade ago when you presented “First Nations Vacations” at the ICOM “Museums, Heritage & Cultural Tourism” conference (Trujillo - Peru and La Paz-Bolivia (2000)), what’s changed?

DC: Not a lot. For one thing, academic prejudice remains – whereby non-Indigenous persons with a University degree convince themselves that they know MORE than any non-tertiary educated Indigenous person – about Indigenous culture. This worldwide problem has led to the view that museum heads, in general, are not equal partners but rather vestiges of colonialism era mentalities with a superiority complex; though luckily for me I have good relations with Barbados Museum officials.

IN: What prompted you to start “First Nations Vacations”?

DC: The high unemployment on most Indigenous territories coupled with quite unspoiled natural surroundings made me think of formulating our own eco-cultural tourism product, one that could be applied elsewhere by almost any Indigenous community worldwide, and forge our own Internet presence – thereby eliminating the non-Indigenous middle man – who often earned the bulk of the profits I started this out of my own savings and First Nations Vacations finances the running costs of maintaining the website and internet presence at www.guidedculturaltraveltours.com

IN: How does this work in a sustainable way?

DC: Very well. With my system, for every visitor, the community knows that 4 Indigenous people get part-time employment and many others will benefit indirectly. Taking Pakuri Arawak Territory as the main example, each visitor is granted a US\$50 voucher which must be used to purchase local handicrafts – basketry, pottery, or woodcarvings, etc. So, the artisan community knows that every time a visitor comes, people will get sales. Of the vehicle-owners in the community, 2 get hired (a different one for each leg of the round trip) to and from Pakuri and the Guyana airport. Shop owners, farmers, hunters and fisherman benefit directly in that all food is purchased in the community. The Village Council receives a tax (US\$5) per visitor per day, which goes into community funds, and the Chief receives a one-time per visitor fee (US\$5) for the official welcome, getting some personal benefit as per traditional tribal protocol. One lady (unwed mothers get priority) from the community is assigned to each visitor to take charge of hand-washing clothes and meals and one male community member is assigned to each visitor as personal guide and escort for the duration of the visit,

a minimum stay of one week. This gives the visitor peace of mind, whether for bird watching, canoe trips on the river, overland hikes – or just hanging out for the village night-life (bars & dance spots do exist on Pakuri). Canoe owners get paid a hire fee for the use of their canoe as do villagers with exotic pets (maybe a parrot or tapir) when visitors want to be photographed with their animals.

IN: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (September 2007) recognizes “that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment”, “the right to self-determination”, to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”, “traditional ownership” and “Indigenous rights” to “lands, territories and resources” as well as “restitution” rights (Art. 3, 26, 28). Has the impact of this emancipating proclamation been globally understood?

DC: In Guyana and most 3rd World countries, Indigenous communities are not as powerful as in North America or Europe. We are about 50 years behind in terms of recognized political rights and assertiveness, and knowledge of our full gamut of UN recognized rights.

IN: How are Indigenous rights defended along with the protection of “expressions of cultural diversity” (UNESCO, 2006)?

DC: In Bolivia - where all my indigenous contacts have positive things to say about the Morales regime – I saw for myself on my last visit how things have improved in the Indigenous Peoples’ favour. Yet, in Belize there is tension as descendants of African slaves and Caribs (Garifuna) who were transplanted by the British from St. Vincent are the numerical majority in Belize today and local pre-existing Maya Amerindian rights are not recognized to the same degree as the State has granted to the Garifunas. In Suriname the descendants of Indigenous Africans who escaped from slavery and took over vast areas of formerly Amerindian territories in the Suriname interior – and here too they are the majority and local natives feel usurped.

> Whether Intellectuals like it or not, most ‘Native Americans’ or ‘American Indians’ consider a certain phenotype to be such a vital part of their identity that anyone looking more outwardly Caucasoid or Negroid is not generally considered to be a true representation of the Amerind Identity. Everywhere I go among full-bloods (I am a Amerind/European mixed blood myself) I hear parents telling daughters, “every time you make children with another race you are helping to make your own people disappear”. This is true from a biological standpoint, if you think about it – when you belong to a tribe which numbers in the mere thousands or even hundreds – Biological preservation IS a necessity. Personally, I love the genetic diversity of the earth, but would not want to see the day when everyone on this planet looks the same or the features Columbus first observed five centuries ago – can no longer be found anywhere in the Americas. I never claim to be anything other than a mixed-blood whose loyalties lie with the maternal Amerindian side of my lineage, and this is exactly how I am accepted by native communities. I am not one to claim to be pure when reality is otherwise, and I do not support mixed-bloods trying to claim to be equal to full-bloods. Spiritually maybe, but biologically no.

IN: What’s going on right now on Pakuri Arawak Territory?

DC: We are working on a new ‘museum’ idea this year. Since the *Nancy Lewis Cullity Parrot Protection Act* (2003), the Pakuri Arawaks have not only protected natural heritage, but now with 2,000 Arawaks living on this 240 square mile reservation, we are hoping to build a small structure as a museum – nothing fancy, just a place to educate the youth, show films about Indigenous peoples worldwide and house and showcase artifacts discovered by villagers and Caribbean artifacts I discovered myself. I want the youth to understand the whole Columbus to British colonial experience of our tribal ancestors. We plan to break ground at the site on Pakuri on International Museum Day!

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