
Suriname: The Galibi People Speak Loud and Clear on Protected Areas

The Galibi Nature Reserve is world famous as a nesting site for four endangered sea turtles. Established in 1969, it covers about 400 hectares and receives a steady flow of tourists from the United States and elsewhere.

However, less highlighted is the fact that it is also an integral part of the ancestral territory of the Lower Marowijne River Kalinya people, who have been directly suffering the consequences of the establishment of the protected area.

Ricardo Pané, village chief of the Galibi, one of the largest indigenous villages in the northeast coast of the country, speaks loud and clear about it:

"The indigenous peoples are the first and original inhabitants of the country. We have a centuries-old relationship with our lands and with the environment in which we live. We have been managing nature and its natural resources for centuries. Thanks to sustainable management by the indigenous peoples we still have biodiversity and nature today. If we would have 'developed' the land as did the Western countries, we would be living now in a big, dry desert. Establishing protected areas was thus necessary to protect nature, not against the indigenous peoples who live there but against the greed of companies and the consumer society that want to have more and more goods all the time."

"Another important aspect of protected areas is that they have been established without our consent. In the case of the Galibi protected area, a governmental delegation came to Galibi for a few hours. They cheated and tricked the village leaders of the time, by saying that they intended only to do some research in the area. When they returned three months later, the area already had been declared a protected area by the government. The indigenous peoples had to relocate immediately and stop all activities in the area. The whole area was now claimed by government and the Forest Service (LBB). I saw all this happening as a young boy and saw how the LBB officials treated the local inhabitants very disrespectfully."

"We see these developments as one of the numerous violations of our rights to the lands that we have been living on and using for many, many centuries. One quick meeting by government officials with the people to announce that a protected area has been established does not count as real participation in decision-making. We have different traditions and structures that must be respected by government. It is only now that we have become well aware of the impacts of protected areas and other initiatives."

"During the interior war in Suriname (1987-92), all activities in the area came to a halt and, in 1989, we re-occupied the protected area. After economic life was restored in the early 1990s, under heavy national and international pressure we had to negotiate about the area."

"The government and certain environmental organizations have made profits and received a lot of funds in name of turtle protection. We, the indigenous peoples, were pictured as the bad guys, the people who poach eggs to sell them illegally. It is true that egg poaching was prevalent in the 1990s

when the economic situation in the country was very bad and any form of income was jumped at with both hands in order to survive. But at the same time, the government did not take any measures against their military and customs officers who were buying and trading the eggs. They also did not act against local and foreign fishing companies who killed the sea turtles on sea and who drowned the turtles in their nets. At national and international podia we were the easiest group to portray as the evildoers."

"In the meantime we have become more aware, especially the younger generation, and we have organized ourselves. There is a community organization for environmental protection, the Foundation for Sustainable Nature Management in Alusiaka (STIDUNAL), which will manage the Galibi protected area in cooperation with STINASU. Our vision is that we will have the full management of the protected area in the future and this was agreed to when we formulated the terms of cooperation with STINASU. We want to include protection of the sea turtles as an integral part in our overall development plan for the community. We cannot, however, talk about protecting animals without talking about the well-being of people at the same time."

"International organizations need to take this into account. They cannot continue to deliver funding that will only benefit a small group of people and animals. On paper there are nice programs for combating issues such as poverty and environmental protection, but the community barely realizes any benefits and has no knowledge of what is happening with the money. Accountable management of environmental protection programs --an integrated, not a sectoral approach is needed. At present this is not the case."

"The same is true for the issue of land rights; if our land rights are not legally recognized and secure, we will not agree to government and international organizations getting more authority and control over our lands. With support from the Amerindian Peoples Association of Guyana and international non-governmental organizations, we made a map of our lands and resources. We have presented this map and a number of petitions to the government but have yet to receive an adequate response."

"We thus aim to secure greater participation, on the basis of equality and being fully informed about and involved in decision-making and in the execution, monitoring, and evaluation of environmental projects. We want co-management of protected areas and in the future full self-management in accordance with our own customs and traditions. We do not reject non-indigenous science and techniques, but we have developed management systems over hundreds of years and these must be the basis of managing the nature reserve and the rest of our lands. Environmental protection and protected area management must be an integrated approach that includes environment, development, and recognition of and respect for the rights of the indigenous peoples, including our ownership rights over our traditional lands, territories, and resources, and our knowledge systems. We want direct support from donor and environmental organizations instead of support through other agencies that keep these resources for their own benefit and which are not transparent. We, the indigenous peoples, are willing to cooperate on basis of mutual respect and equality, we ask only that others do the same."

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