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## [Guyana: Conservation International accused of "gross disrespect" to indigenous peoples](#)

The Amerindian Peoples Association (APA) has expressed deep concern about the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish Southern Guyana as a protected area, saying it was "gross disrespect" to local tribes.

Southern Guyana is considered one of the anchors of the National Protected Areas System. Conservation International (CI) and the government of Guyana signed the MOU on November 23 in which they agreed to collaborate in establishing Southern Guyana as a protected area. CI under the provisions of the MOU is to provide US\$1 million to endow a financial mechanism that would support the long-term costs of managing protected areas in Guyana, among other things. It will provide a further US\$1 million should the government declare Southern Guyana a protected area by June 30, 2003. The MOU also commits CI to seek financing from private donors, international agencies and governments to increase the capital of the proposed financial mechanism.

The APA release issued on November 28 (see full document at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Guyana/areas.html> ) expresses concern that the agreement with CI was signed while the government is still formulating the (Draft) Protected Areas Regulations and revising the Amerindian Act. It also accuses CI of not consulting with the six Wapishana communities in Southern Guyana part of whose ancestral lands will be encompassed in the proposed protected area and whose way of life and those of the Wai-Wais are likely to be affected. The six Wapishana communities are at Shea, Maruranawa, Awarenawa, Aishalton, Karuadanawa, and Achiwib.

But according to CI regional director, retired Major General Joe Singh there are Wai-Wai communities at Masakanari and Erefoimo and after visits by CI and a number of government officials and briefings of the other communities by Professor George Mentore who is fluent in the Wai-Wai language, the Touchaus wrote the government requesting that it initiate the process to establish the area as a protected one.

Singh responding to the release says the MOU is the beginning of the process in which it would be consulting with all the stakeholders at the national, regional and community levels. He says that to consult with the Wapishana communities ahead of the MOU would have been inconsistent with its relationship with the government.

He added that during the consultations the views of the various groups identified by the government would be taken on board and presented to the government. He says the process would be similar to that now going on in the Kanuku Mountains to establish that region as a protected area.

The APA release says that on learning of the visit to the Wai Wais and of the letter sent to the government, the Touchaus of the Deep South wrote CI expressing their concern about the proposed site, which overlaps Wapishana ancestral lands noting that CI is yet to visit with the Wapishana communities.

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The APA describes CI's actions as "gross disrespect" for the Wapishana communities who "will have to live with a protected area long after the employees of such organisations have retired".

It says too that it hopes that the issue of land titles to ancestral lands and other matters would be addressed in the new Amerindian Act and expressed concern that the communities would not be given a fair chance to have these titles if a protected area system is prematurely foisted upon them.

The APA said it was important to note that Guyana has specific international obligations to recognise and respect the rights of indigenous peoples to own lands they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used. The APA also said it was difficult to understand why the MOU sets June 2003 as a target for establishing the southern forest as a protected area when many issues remain unresolved.

"If these issues are not seriously addressed, protected areas and conservation of biological diversity will not only be at the expense of the rights and ways of life of Guyana's first peoples, they will also be unsustainable", the organisation added.

Source: "Amerindian group slams memo on southern forest protected area. Conservation group says all stakeholders to be consulted", SN, 4 December 2002, sent by Fergus MacKay, Forest Peoples Programme, e-mail: fergus@euronet.nl