
Venezuela: Mapping a way forward

The Caura river in Venezuela is the last large affluent of the Orinoco which has not been polluted, carved up, dammed or diverted by mining, roads, logging and large-scale development projects. The upper reaches are home to two ethnic groups, 'Amazonian Indians'. These are the Ye'kwana, a people with a tradition of well-developed shifting agriculture and of building huge conical collective dwellings, who have been in the area at least as long as historical records relate; and the Sanema (Northern Yanomami) a more mobile group of hunters, gatherers and incipient agriculturalists who moved into the area from the south about a hundred years ago. In all, about 3,500 Indians scattered in some two dozen settlements occupy the four million hectares of river, forest and mountain that stretch between frontier "criollo" settlements on the lower river and the Brazilian border to the south. Ye'kwana tales and chants tell of a primordial time when one of their culture heroes, Kuyujani, walked the boundaries of the territory naming and creating the high mountains, waterfalls, sacred rocks and pools. These stories constitute charters which establish the deep spiritual ties that bind the Ye'kwana to their homeland. Sanema spirituality is likewise deeply imbued with a knowledge of the power of forests spirits and animal beings whom Sanema shamans communicate with and embody through dreams, during nightly chants and through the use of hallucinogens during daytime rituals. When Sanema fall ill, the shamans recruit the power of these tutelary spirits to combat the malign forces that cause disease. Veiled from our eyes in the day, the spirits can be discerned in the roaring voices of waterfalls, in light shining through foam and seed down, in the drip of water from pools in the crotches of giant forest trees and in the calls of animals and birds. The forest is alive --not just as a useful 'ecosystem' abundant in food and 'resources'-- but as a veritable society of meaning and power that gives these peoples their identity.

The Venezuelan government has long viewed the Caura river as a potential source of hydropower. One proposed dam at the Para falls, where the mighty Caura crashes over a hundred metre drop down to the lower river, would impound the whole river. A second dam proposed further up the Caura's main tributary, the Mereveri, would divert over half the river's water across the watershed into the neighbouring Paragua river, to supplement the water already flowing through the Guri dam on the Caroni. Both options would mean the inundation of the Indians' richest agricultural and hunting lands and require their forced relocation. Electricity from these dams would be exported to Brazil to fuel development in the State of Roraima, conveyed along power lines already cut across the lands of the neighbouring Pemon people. Ecologists can barely guess at the environmental implications, especially for the million hectares of swamp forest in the lower river, which would likely dry out if the river was to be dammed. The Indians are clear, however. They don't want the dams.

To avert these threats, the Ye'kwana and Sanema formed their own inter-ethnic association, which they called Kuyujani. The association --and the network of radio transmitters they have implanted-- links together all the widely dispersed settlements of the river and meets annually to elect political representatives and decide strategy about how to deal with the challenges facing the river basin --gold miners, the agricultural frontier, tourism, and hydropower-- and how best to push for recognition of their rights to land. With technical assistance from the Forest Peoples Programme, and funding from the IUCN-Netherlands, Rainforest Foundation and Nouvelle Planete, the Indians have mapped their territory. This has meant a trained team of Ye'kwana and Sanema visiting every

settlement and canoeing and trekking to every area of significance in their domain. Using Global Positioning System devices they then 'geo-referenced' all this information so it could then be plotted on a base map with the help of the Universidad Nacional Experimental de Guayana. The result is a huge and detailed, highly coloured map which shows the Indians' names for all the features in their territory. Now, as part of second project, Kuyujani is developing a 'management plan' for this area, based on self-run community-level workshops to establish the customary system of resource management and complement this with western ideas of resource management through the training of eight community members at the University in the biological sciences.

These pioneering initiatives have helped promote a shift in national policy towards the Indians. In 1999, Venezuela adopted a new Constitution recognizing, for the first time, indigenous peoples' rights to their 'habitats'. In 2001, the Venezuelan Congress adopted a law establishing a mechanism for the recognition of these 'habitats', which was strongly influenced by the Caura model. The National Commission required to enact the law was established in August the same year. In early 2002, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) was informed that the Venezuelan Congress had also ratified ILO Convention 169. Meanwhile, discussion continues on a new organic law on indigenous peoples, which would provide further recognition of indigenous rights and institutions. Meanwhile, Kuyujani has submitted the first official application to the National Commission to seek legal recognition of the Upper Caura as the habitat of the Ye'kwana and Sanema. Kuyujani leaders have also provided advice and training to other indigenous communities in the Venezuelan Amazon on how to map and claim their lands. As long as the Venezuelan government sustains its commitment to this enlightened new policy, the basis has now been set for a country-wide recognition of indigenous rights to their lands.

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