

## **CLAG Field Study Award Report**

The Rupununi is a savannah in the far south of Guyana along the border with Brazil. Most outsiders have never heard of it, even many coastal Guyanese. Traveling to the Rupununi is expensive as well, and I would never have been there if I had not been sent as a volunteer with the Peace Corps, but I'm glad that I have, because it is a unique and fascinating place.

The Rupununi is predominantly inhabited by the Indigenous Macusi and Wapishana peoples, who hold title to about 30% of the land under Guyana's "Amerindian Act". When I was a volunteer, my host community's land title bordered a large new protected area and I was tasked with promoting conservation, fostering appreciation for wildlife, and incorporating outdoor education into the science curriculum. What I soon found of course was that the community members are well aware of the problem of habitat loss, but this is only one among many social, economic, and ecological challenges which they have to contend with.

Perhaps the most significant challenge many Indigenous communities of the Rupununi currently face is water access, but it is not a simple issue. Several reports have already been published on climate change, water scarcity, and economic vulnerability of the peoples of the Rupununi. So, when a two-year drought hit in 2015-2016 and was followed by a major flood, the new president of Guyana flew to the Rupununi and committed to addressing the crisis. The government of Guyana set to work funding a number of water management and climate change adaptation programs, the largest of which was the Sustainable Agricultural Development Program (SADP).

During my two years as a volunteer, two of these projects came to my community (a well drilling project and a large dam). Nearby, construction began on a research station for irrigation farming, hydrometeorological surveying, cattle ranching, and fish rearing – this was to be the operational center for the SADP. These projects had been supposedly designed for the benefit of the Indigenous communities, so many government officials were dismayed when community leaders drove over 12 hours to Georgetown to protest.

As I mentioned earlier, many coastal Guyanese have never heard of the Rupununi, much less travelled there. Yet from my vantage point as a volunteer, it seemed that many decisions that impact the Indigenous inhabitants of the Rupununi are made by individuals on the coast. As I prepared to return to the region for my field work, it seemed to me that this postcolonial dynamic might explain some of the communities' resistance to seemingly benevolent development projects.

With that said, I am an outsider myself, and my foreignness cast a shadow of doubt over my own work. Throughout the design of this research project I knew I ran the risk of perpetuating these dynamics, rather than addressing them. While there is no solving this issue, I can at least say that the financial assistance from the CLAG field study award has helped me to cover the costs of some important mitigating measures, which I might otherwise have omitted.

Getting meaningful participation from communities required establishing free, prior, and informed consent, and building trust. To that end, rather than simply contacting communities remotely (by mail or radio) to request their written consent to conduct research, I decided to follow-up on my outreach efforts with in-person visits, before asking to conduct any kind of research work. The initial trips and return research visits added up to over \$300USD, since travel to the communities was very costly.

In addition, this approach meant that I had to apply for my research permit with the Guyanese government *before* I had acquired consent from all of the communities I intended to visit. As a result, I had to return to the coast after my initial visits in order to include the new invitations from communities and update my permit. This return flight to Georgetown cost me another \$330USD. Of course, I could have requested the communities' consent by sending a letter, and it might well have been granted, but this approach allowed me to address community leaders' questions and concerns and to correct any misconceptions they might have had before jumping into my research.

As it relates to the fieldwork and data collection itself, the CLAG scholarship came in handy again. I was able to use the remaining funds to pay for quality electronic equipment (a voice recorder and GPS) which I later donated to local individuals who expressed interest in doing cultural conservation and mapping work. I also bought a small camping hammock, so the participating communities wouldn't feel pressured to provide me with a bed. Lastly, I carried with me a folding flipchart with markers, so that I could explain and illustrate the purpose and outcomes of my research at community meetings. This flipchart was also donated to one of the host communities for their own use at the end of my fieldwork. While these might seem to some like small tokens, I believe they made a significant difference to the communities I visited. This equipment improved the quality of my field work and allowed me to work in a way that was more respectful of the community members' time, resources, and autonomy.

Through these interactions, members of the communities explained to me that while investment in water infrastructure was welcome, the projects which I was studying were in many ways out of touch with the needs, ambitions, and social realities of the communities which they were intended to benefit. This is chiefly because consultation had not been timely, meaningful, or respectful in most cases. However, I also understood the objectives of the project planners and the constraints they faced. These constraints were in many ways similar to my own, and the added funds which I was able to commit to community outreach, consultation, and compensation, made a substantial difference in the way I was received and the quality of my interactions.

In short, the costs associated with consultation, community compensation, and dissemination of information can be easily overlooked (or underestimated) when budgeting for work with Indigenous communities. However, they are necessary to engaging communities in an equitable and responsible way. The water infrastructure projects which I set out to study all fell short in

this regard, and I think this can likely explain many of the projects' broader problems as well. With this in mind, I am grateful that I was able to avoid some of these pitfalls in my own work.

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