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Constructing Shared Meaning and Practice: An Amerindian Knowledge-Based Approach to Collaborative Wildlife Conservation in Guyana

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Abstract

At this initial stage of my inquiry, this paper does not purport to be a complete or authoritative analysis of the research topic. Rather, it reflects the substantive issues; empirical, philosophical and methodological questions seminal to my doctoral research. The pretext for my doctoral research and for this paper is to explore whether a collaborative wildlife conservation approach that is grounded in Amerindian wildlife knowledge and stewardship, yet complemented by decolonized conservation knowledge, has the potential of being more socially/environmentally just, reflexive, holistic and relevant to Amerindian communities, animal beings and ecosystems. The transformative potential of the processes and concepts embodied in indigenous knowledge systems holds the greatest possibility (Simpson, 2004; Bishop, 1998) for decolonizing conservation, for collaboration between conservationist and indigenist discourses and practices, and for local stewardship of tropical forests and wildlife. Also part of this challenging process is how indigenous and conservation communities of inquiry will be able to engage and become mutually respectful, strengthening and validating, while producing research and praxis based on shared knowledge and aspirations. I am specifically interested in how such an approach can be used by indigenous peoples in Guyana as a catalyst for asserting their conceptualization of social-

ecological landscapes, animal beings, stewardship and conservation, territoriality and self-determination?

Indigenous Peoples and the Imperative for Decolonized Conservation

The relatively intact nature and low level of anthropogenic disturbance on the Amazonian forest system (particularly the forests of Guyana, Surinam and French Guiana) can be largely attributed to the traditional knowledge, practices and stewardship regimes of indigenous and local peoples who have inhabited and interacted with these forests as their ancestral territories (Silvius et al, 2004; Bubier & Bradshaw, 2002; Colchester, 1997). The textured and complex ecological, cultural, spiritual and subsistence relationships that Amerindian peoples of the region have developed with their forest habitats, plant and animal species has influenced and shaped the resource management and conservation philosophy and approaches of modern generations of South American subsistence communities. However, the ecological wealth and vastness of Neotropical forests have inspired ambitious development, commercial and conservation interests with each demanding their stake in the management of tropical forests. Depending on the assumptions, ideology and agenda informing external stakeholders' interests in tropical forests and wildlife resources, their interventions have redefined the way forest systems and other species are constructed, valued, claimed, and contested - creating paradoxes within conservation discourse, policy, and practice (Chung Tiam Fook, 2002).

Conservation is not simply about protection; it entails the reallocation of land, biological species, water and mineral resources, as well as the political economic restructuring of social institutions (Chung Tiam Fook, 2002; Stone & D'Andrea, 2001). Conservation also involves a dialectical relationship between people and their social-ecological environments that is grounded in specific knowledge systems that reflect the context of both human and ecological communities. However, conservationist and Amerindian conceptualizations of ecological and social systems and their stewardship are informed by different values, beliefs, epistemological and cultural systems that have long been characterized by inequitable power dynamics. Inadequate conservation approaches and management regimes controlled largely by foreign agendas can disempower and marginalize local and indigenous actors from the collaborative conservation process. They can also reinforce historic patterns of exclusion from their rights and means to use and protect resources from their

ancestral territories. It becomes problematic and potentially patronizing when seemingly well-intentioned, and purportedly collaborative, conservation and resource management projects seek to incorporate the participation of indigenous stakeholders within projects that continue to be top-down, externally researched, planned, structured and managed.

Although indigenous participation and knowledge have become part of the accepted vernacular in international development and conservation policies, the majority have not substantively generated effective strategies for building on local initiatives, or for recognizing and integrating traditional systems for wildlife and ecological knowledge and stewardship (Hennessey, 2001; Chief Wavey, 2005). There has been a tendency for conservation researchers, project managers and scientists to extract useful pieces of knowledge, or re-presentations of knowledge, from complex traditional systems and worldviews and appropriate them within Western normative matrices, classifications and frameworks. Indigenous knowledge then becomes a convenient and ubiquitous acronym (TEK) that can be simultaneously used as a source of baseline data to fill the gaps in conservation research, as well as to legitimize the collaboration and cooptation of indigenous peoples and their knowledge. When TEK systems are not addressed as tools for decolonization, their application by scientific and state researchers in environmental management has been criticized by Canadian Aboriginal scholar Simpson (2004) and Maori scholar Smith (1999) as remaining within the framework of the neo-colonial project. Lotz-Sisitka (2002) discusses the dual task of South African researchers in developing contextually relevant frameworks for traditional knowledge while ensuring that these frameworks are not adopted as mass produced and globalized forms of knowledge production. Ellen (1993, 1996) and Toledo, (2002) warn of experts and scientists who abstract systems of TEK from their social, ethical, productive, and cultural contexts as they generate selected bits of information in a framework determined by quite specialized requirements of conventional biological science and taxonomy.

It is, therefore, fundamental for conservationists to understand and respect the traditional rights, perceptions and relationships of traditional people to their land, plant and animal species in order to generate sustainable long-term wildlife conservation strategies that are guided by an interdisciplinary and intercultural vision (Ulloa et al, 2004). Wildlife conservation strategies directed at protected areas that overlap ancestral territories, such as Guyana's Iwokrama forest, will only be effective if they harmonize the use and stewardship of wildlife with indigenous

cultures (Tisen et al, 1999). Such strategies must include plans to support traditional ecological and cultural knowledge and institutions, as well as encourage the continued sustainable use of plant and animal species that are of cultural and ecological interest to the people. Exploring the relationships between the entire repertory of Amerindian symbolic representations and conceptualizations of the forest landscape and animal beings, and the combination of practical approaches through which the productive, cultural and spiritual appropriation of animals occurs are central to this process (Toledo, 2002). As well, traditional territorial, stewardship and resource rights are directly linked with indigenous peoples' capacity for cultural and biological reproduction and their ability to sustain human and wildlife populations. Amerindian approaches to forest and animal stewardship are also influenced by wider socio-political processes of territoriality and self-determination; national development and economic models; livelihood patterns; and social/ ecological movements. Significant to this analysis is understanding what different community members (including women and children) identify as the primary causes of pressure and disjuncture on their traditional relationships with animals, and moreover, on their traditional knowledge and practice regarding use and stewardship of those animals.

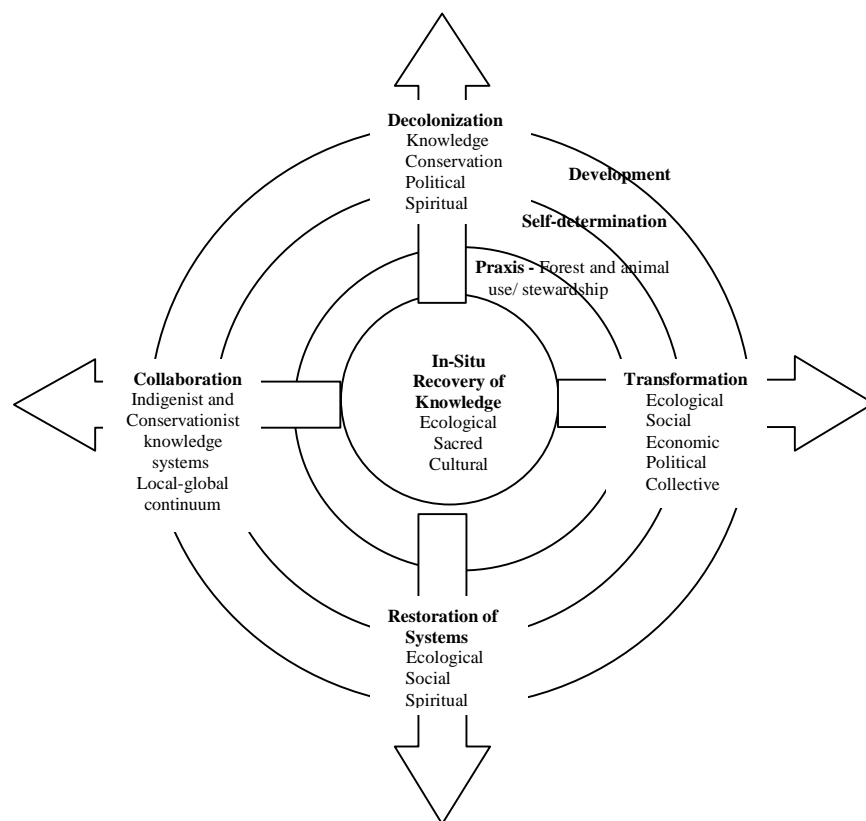
Indigenous Social-Ecological Conceptualizations of Tropical Forests and Animals

A body of knowledge about the world we envision and wish to represent is based on conceptualizations of the beings, landscapes, objects, spaces, concepts, and other entities that are perceived to exist in some area of interest, as well as the relationships that connect them. Each knowledge-based system, such as forest and wildlife conservation, is embedded in some form of implicit and explicit conceptualizations of ecological and human socio-cultural systems and the entities that define them. Represented below is a methodological and conceptual framework (Fig. 1) formulated to guide the substantive issues and relationships framing indigenous stewardship and conservation of social-ecological landscapes, plant and animal species that are explored in this paper. It is inspired by the work of Maori scholar and activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) on creating an 'Indigenous Research Agenda' as a strategic aspect of what she describes as the modern indigenous peoples' project.

The framework reflects the conditions of knowing and being (in-situ recovery of knowledge, praxis, self-determination, development) and processes (collaboration, transformation,

decolonization, restoration of systems) for Amerindian knowledge-based collaborative wildlife conservation. Similar to the collaborative conservation metaphor of the three-legged stool (discussed later in the paper) which represents the Makushi conceptualization of collaborative conservation and shared social and ecological meaning and praxis between Amerindian communities, conservationists and the government - this framework is symbolic of a *four*-legged stool representing this conceptualization. The four legs of the stool represent the sustainable and ongoing processes of collaborative conservation and research partnerships which should be mutually respectful, enabling, healing, connective and informative. The seat and rungs of the stool represent the conditions and states of knowing and being through which Amerindian peoples move in their social-ecological environments. The processes and conditions are non-hierarchical, dynamic, reciprocal and reflexive; all of which act in support of the focal condition (seat) of collaborative wildlife conservation which is to recover Amerindian ecological, cultural and sacred knowledge in-situ.

Figure 1



For Amerindian peoples, participation in conservation initiatives is not so much an issue of conservation from a Western perspective, but more as a means of retaining intergenerational stewardship over the land and resources to which they have historically considered themselves integral (MacDonald, 2004; Allicock, 2003). Within the knowledge, spiritual and cultural repertoires of Amerindian communities, human relationships to the land and other beings are central to the survival of the people *as* peoples and to their ecosystems. The savannahs, forests, waters and mountains are a perennial teacher that holds all knowledge of life and death; the cyclical and evolving ecological and cultural relationships between humans and other beings; and the unique ecological and cultural ways of knowing and being in balance with the natural and spiritual worlds (Mentore, 2005; Lawrence, 2004; Daes, 2000). According to Haig-Brown and Archibald (1996), the spiritual is inseparable from the physical whereby ecosystems, plants, animals and humans are animate and infused with sacred energy.

Amerindian knowledge approaches to utilizing and protecting forest systems and animals are embodied within the collective social, ecological, cultural, productive and spiritual relationships and experiences of the community – their social and ecological memory. Amerindian social memory (knowledge, cognition, technology) of the land, other species and biogeophysical structures and processes does not evolve directly from ecosystem dynamics but rather, it emerges from the spatial and temporal location of the community within a dynamic social-ecological landscape (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2003). According to Toledo (2002) there are at least four types of experience that inform social-ecological memory and knowledge synthesis amongst communities: 1) the experience accumulated over historical time and transmitted inter-generationally; 2) the experience socially shared by the contemporary generation; 3) the experience shared by the household or filial group to which an individual belongs; and 4) the experience particular to each individual, achieved through the repetition of the annual cycles (natural and productive), processes (ecological, social and cultural) and relationships (human/animal/nature) – enriched by the perceived variations and unpredictable, dynamic conditions associated with them.

According to their cosmologies, the forest is conceptualized and experienced by Amerindian peoples as a social-ecological landscape that is holistic, interconnected, adaptive, diverse, unpredictable, dynamic and complex - connecting temporal and spatial notions of history, identity,

relationships and place to pragmatic subsistence concerns. This is arguably a precursor to the ecosystem approach (Mercurieff, 2002; Yaffee, 1999; Grumbine, 1994) which underlies modern ecology and conservation epistemology and discourse. Amerindian conceptions of their social-ecological environment are like a network of reference points and trails to which particular communities and individuals are connected in physical, social and cultural space. Davidson-Hunt & Berkes (2003) and Ellen (1996) assert that these reference points are sites and objects in an unbounded landscape linked to their appearance in narratives, songs and legends. Amerindian knowledge is both local and holistic in that it codifies detailed information about particular animal or plant species at a localized and seemingly restricted scale, yet that knowledge must also reflect biogeophysical information such as: minerals, soils, waters, geological forms, landscapes, vegetations, climate, and seasonality.

Different overall combinations of Amerindian strategies particularly for wildlife stewardship have different ecological profiles (Ellen, 1996; Chapin, 1994) in terms of energy transfer, limiting factors and carrying capacity, the degree of human effort required, their effects on the landscape, and the cultural regulation of human-animal relations. Accordingly, different Amerindian strategies must also have different knowledge profiles to define ecological profiles. This knowledge of plant and animal beings is the result of generations of accumulated experience, experimentation and information exchange that reflects the peoples' ability to connect observations at the species level with informed conceptions about forest structure and dynamics (Davidson-Hunt, 2003; Posey, 1999). Such empirical knowledge is also grounded in the broader socially and culturally informed conceptualizations and worldview of Amerindian peoples about the physical world they inhabit. Amerindians' most immediate empirical knowledge is of individual animals, or species-focused knowledge (knowledge of form, physiology, behaviour, feeding habits, connections with other species, the activity of predators and diseases), and is highly variable from one animal to the next. Species knowledge is often connected to the importance of the animal beings to Amerindian peoples in terms of their nutritional, economic, sacred and symbolic value. The knowledge, meaning and value of animal beings are often transmitted through Amerindian legends, songs and narratives of human-animal conceptions and relationships (including symbolism, allegory, metaphor, phenomenology, embodiment, and shamanism).

There are three guiding principles to be considered in establishing wildlife conservation approaches (Silvius et al., 2004) that are based on the inseparable domains of social-ecological landscapes (nature, culture and production) and grounded in Amerindian ecological and cultural beliefs. First, the Cultural Principle considers Amerindian conceptions of the human-animal and social-ecological relationships; values and meanings of animal beings; social practices, productive processes, and processes of interaction with other societies. The cultural principle also implies a recovery and consolidation of Amerindian knowledge, practices, innovations and cultural strategies that refer to stewardship strategies of animal beings. Second, the Conservationist Principle reflects environmental conditions and ecological knowledge of animals; an evaluation of population and community ecology and anthropogenic use of animal species; biological characteristics of the species; extinction processes; and the social-ecological limits of the forest system. The goal is sustainable harvest and/or use of animals, attaining the maximum production for human consumption that will not unsustainably deplete wildlife populations or make them vulnerable to local extinction. Implicit in this principle is stewardship with and by the people because wildlife conservation is only viable when traditional practices, knowledge and rights are considered equally within a conservation strategy. Third, the Productive Principle considers context-relevant, sustainable and culturally sensitive technological improvements in the traditional stewardship of endemic or introduced species (domestic species) in order to achieve greater productivity of animal or plant protein, a process that can help reduce pressure on game and commercially traded animals. This principle aims at generating strategies that ensure quality and security for forest-dependent Amerindian peoples.

A Case Study on Guyana's Iwokrama Tropical Forest

The empirical and action-based research of my doctoral work will focus primarily on Guyana's Iwokrama forest protected area – specifically, a collaborative conservation strategy between the Iwokrama Rainforest Conservation Project, the Amerindian-led Bina Hill Institute for Research, Development and Training (including the NRDDDB) and the neighbouring Makushi Amerindian communities and institutions. Iwokrama is a Makushi word meaning an area of bountiful palm cabbage worms (*rhyncophorus* beetle larvae) – these worms colonize a fallen *ite* palm tree and are roasted and eaten by the Makushi. According to a Makushi legend of Iwokrama (Balkaran, 2002), the Great Spirit Makunaima and his younger brother Insikiran were exploring the forests and

mountains of Iwokrama. The evil being Okoraima was never to be gazed upon directly but Insikiran defied the warning and was instantly killed and carried off by Okoraima to his secret hideout. Makunaima surreptitiously followed Okoraima and discovered where he lived – in the Iwokrama mountains. It is said that the mystical evil being Okoraima fought alongside the Makushis in that area. In the ensuing battle, the Caribs were defeated and Okoraima became a hero only to turn on his benefactors, whom he ate one by one until he was eventually killed.

The Iwokrama tropical forest covers approximately 2% of Guyana's total forest cover and is part of the Guiana Shield (one of the four remaining intact forest systems in the world alongside Congo, Papua New Guinea, and Amazonía) and represents an important transition zone in terms of rainfall, landforms, human histories and biological communities. Moreover, along with the North Rupununi savannahs (including over 200 oxbow and depression lakes distributed along the Rupununi, Essequibo and Rewa Rivers), it acts as a convergence point for three significant ecosystems: the Amazon River, the Orinoco River and the Guiana Shield ecosystems (Watkins, 2002; Fernandes & NRDDB, 2004). Its forests are comprised of greenheart, wallaba and seasonally flooded palm and Mora forests. Iwokrama is habitat to many of the world's rarest species of birds, mammals, reptiles and insects - many of which are endemic only to Guyana. For its size of 371,000 hectares, the Iwokrama forest inhabits the highest density of mammal, freshwater fish, bat and bird species anywhere in the world including: 1200 species of land vertebrates including 200 mammal species; 500 bird species, 150 reptile and amphibian species; 105 amphibians; 100 bat species; 420 fish species; and more than 1500 flora species (Brennan et al, 2003; McConnell, 2000).

Compared to other parts of the Amazon region, the Iwokrama ecosystem and its wildlife have been under relatively little anthropogenic pressures due to low population densities and a low level of international development and investment. However, a combination of neo-colonial development models, foreign debt and economic reforms, global capitalism, drug trade, political jockeying and corruption have contributed to an escalating level of socio-economic inequality, poverty, and racially and politically motivated violence in Guyana. These pressures have had serious repercussions on the social-ecological landscape of the country and its peoples, threatening their survival and integrity. One such pressure, the commercial wildlife trade, has attributed to more than 30% of the

mammals and other animal species listed as endangered under the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) (Brennan, 2003).

As diverse as its ecosystems, floral and faunal species are Guyana's peoples. Dubbed the "Land of Six Nations", Guyana has an ethnically and linguistically diverse population comprised of Indo-Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, Chinese, Mixed, Portuguese, European and Amerindian peoples. Guyana has the largest and only traditional indigenous population in the Caribbean - approximately 50,000 Amerindian people comprising 8% of the national population (Forte, 1999). Guyana's nine Amerindian groups derive from: the Cariban linguistic branch – Karinya (Caribs), Akawaio, Patamona, Arecuna, Makushi and Wai-wai; the Arawakan linguistic branch - coastal Lokono (Arawaks) and Wapishana; and the Warrau comprise their own linguistic branch (Forte, 2000). In Region 9, fourteen Makushi communities of approximately 9000 inhabitants dwell in the communities of: Kurupukari aka Fairview (only community inside the Iwokrama protected area), Annai Central, Apoteri, Aranaputa, Crash Water, Kwatamang, Kwarmatta, Massara, Rewa, Rupertee, Surama, Toka, Wowetta and Yakarinta are located in the North Rupununi Savannah District southwest of the Iwokrama forest.

Makushi occupy the savannah-forest ecotone (Potter, 1993) and are completely dependent on the tropical forest for their material, cultural, social and spiritual livelihoods. Traditional livelihood activities still engaged in by Makushi peoples are subsistence hunting, fishing (Rupununi River and tributaries), harvesting of non-timber forest products (NFTPs), some forest agriculture such as cassava, and handicrafts. However, due to persistently high levels of poverty and isolation and the lure of remittance incomes, many younger generations of Makushi have been usurped into the growing cash economy derived from natural resources extraction in the interior (Colchester, 2004). Trapping wildlife (especially Psittaciformes - parrots and macaws) for the commercial wildlife trade; gold prospecting; logging and timber mills; local mercantilist production, exchange and consumption regimes; and migration to the coast or Brazil for jobs have been the most common industries for attracting young Amerindians in search of wage labour.

Collaborative Wildlife Conservation:

Amerindian Knowledge and Rights and the Iwokrama Project

The Iwokrama Project boasts an impressive portfolio of initiatives and achievements in the areas of sustainable forestry and wildlife stewardship; biodiversity conservation and utilization; ethnobiology, human ecology and sustainable social development; forestry research, education and training in natural resource management; and dissemination of knowledge, information and communication (Watkins, 2003). As alluded to earlier in the paper, the metaphor of the three-legged stool (Allicock, 2003) represents the proactive struggle of Amerindians to sustainably control their lands, stewardship of floral and faunal relations and cultural development through collaborative rights and knowledge-based management with two other stakeholder groups: the Iwokrama Conservation Project and the national Government/ private sector. Each stakeholder group represents one stool leg and together, they support the seat of sustainable development. However, despite a participatory mandate oriented toward developing and strengthening Amerindian knowledge and forest stewardship, the Iwokrama Centre is an external institution that is staffed by many foreign and non-Amerindian Guyanese researchers, and is funded and steered by largely foreign capital and agendas. Thus, it is necessary to understand the extent to which the Makushi are actively recognized as rights- and knowledge-holders of the lands and resources within the context of collaborative conservation and research of the Iwokrama forest. To consolidate a meaningful and equitable collaborative process, an indigenous-directed partnership approach (as conceptualized in Figure 1) to ongoing negotiations of the decolonizing, recognition, and protection of Amerindian knowledge and rights (Pickett & Fatnowna, 2002) is vital to sustainable wildlife conservation.

Also vital within the three-legged stool conservation approach are Amerindian perceptions of their social-ecological environment, as well as narratives of symbolic human-animal relationships. Such knowledge systems define the human, plant and animal beings that comprise the universe; human relationships of continuity with those beings (animism, totemism); representation and classification of animal entities based on Amerindian social and cultural identity; strategies for wildlife use and stewardship; and perceptions and values ascribed to wildlife abundance and scarcity. Amerindian peoples in Guyana and throughout the Amazonian region have a similar predilection for viewing animals as animal persons to whom they attribute anthropomorphic qualities and conceptually classify in accordance with human social and cultural identity (Mentore, 2005; Silvius et al, 2004; de Castro, 1998; Fuentes et al, 2002; Cormier, 2003; Gade, 1999; Descola, 1996). Although differences are perceived by Amerindian peoples as existing between

humans and other beings, there appears to be a prevailing notion of continuity in the relations between them that can be generally defined as animism or totemism.

Makushi and other Amerindian peoples in Guyana adhere specifically to animistic systems in their relationships with other beings in terms of how they conceptually define and relate to plants and animals as persons. Animism refers to all living plant, animal and natural forces inhabiting the same earth realm through interconnected and interdependent relationships. All beings have consciousness, speech, volition and contribute to the earth's well-being. Animism amongst Amerindians functions as a way of socially identifying animal beings through relationships of hunting, reciprocity and protection (Descola, 1996). Also common amongst Amerindian peoples of Guyana and Amazonian region is the prominence of a superior spirit guardian who is the immediate keeper of animals and plants and is responsible for ensuring that plant or animal life is not destroyed or mistreated (Ulloa et al, 2004). This spirit guardian can appoint a human being as a *Peaiamen* or shaman who mediates the interactions between humans, nature/animals, and the spiritual realm as well as regulates hunting and wildlife use by designating territories and species as sacred and/or forbidden.

Within the three-legged stool approach, the Iwokrama Act uniquely supports autonomous Makushi partnership structures, approaches and institutions that serve as conduits for the consolidation of Amerindian rights, conceptions and aspirations. Some of these institutions are: North Rupununi Development District Board (NRDDB); Bina Hill Institute for Research, Development and Training; Wildlife Clubs; School Yard Ecology Program; Makushi Women's Groups; Community Environmental Workers Programme; 14 Village Councils; North Rupununi District Agricultural Producers Association; Radio Paiwomak; the Makushi Language Initiative. More formalized Amerindian institutions connected with Iwokrama are: Amerindian People's Association (APA); Guyana Organisation of Indigenous Peoples, the National Amerindian Council, and The Amerindian Action Movement of Guyana. As an institutional development out of an indigenous resurgence in Guyana, the autonomous APA emerged in 1991 to assert Amerindian territorial and self-determination rights and to ensure that Amerindian's voices were recognized in decision and policy-making at the national, and increasingly at the international, level. APA (2000) firmly supports Amerindian self-determination; the legal recognition of territorial and resource rights; the

recovery and development of Amerindian knowledge; and the self-empowerment of Amerindian peoples as the foundations of equitable conservation management.

Although territoriality is deeply connected to Amerindian forest and wildlife use, regulation and accessibility processes; historical socio-cultural and ecological processes; relationship amongst use areas; and conceptions of boundaries and limits (Ulloa et al., 1999), it is a perennial issue threatening the security of Amerindian peoples in Guyana. Although Guyana's Amerindian Act (and recently revisioned Bill) legally designates Amerindian rights to forest use and control in the sustainable utilization zones, there continues to be no transparent and adequate legal instrument to ratify and demarcate traditional areas (James et al, 2006). Thus, ambiguous interpretation of boundaries, unilateral discretion by the Amerindian Minister over the location and extent of land titles, and exploitation by national and foreign interests continue to prevail. Like many indigenous peoples in social-ecological landscapes around the world, Guyanese Amerindian stakeholders are not passive victims of global capitalism, but are actively engaged in their own social and environmental justice movement strategies. There are currently five legal cases in which Amerindian communities are struggling for recognition of territorial claims, including large projects by the Iwokrama Rainforest Conservation Centre, the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, and the Government of Guyana's implementation of the National Protected Area System clearly illustrate these contentious issues (La Rose, 2004).

With respect to the Iwokrama Project, the entire area of the Iwokrama forest protected area is land that was claimed by the Makushi people in 1966. However, the Amerindian Land Commission did not honour the claim, arguing that the area was too large for the Makushi to adequately develop and manage and instead titled much smaller areas to the communities. In light of their land claim dispute with the government and the Iwokrama Project since the protected area was proposed, the Makushi have ensured that formal recognition and respect for their rights to territoriality, intellectual property, conservation benefits, customary laws, land tenure and wildlife stewardship systems remain an important issue of their dialogue, collaboration and mandate (Colchester, 1997; Hennessey, 2002). Similarly, the Makushi and other Amerindian nations claim their right to self-determination. This includes their autonomous right to recover, develop and control their knowledge systems, institutions, land and wildlife stewardship and use strategies, as well as to regulate the interventions and activities of non-Amerindian people on their lands. As

Smith (1999) posits, self-determination within the framework of an Amerindian conservation agenda becomes more than a political goal – “it is a goal of social and environmental justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of ecological, social, cultural, spiritual and economic terrains.” Due to the tenuous status of their land titles under the national framework as per the government’s right to extinguish land titles if it suspects the intention of secession among Amerindian groups, Amerindian peoples cautiously define their goals for self-determination within the framework of the Guyanese nation state (Colchester, 2004).

Collaborative Methodology: Shared Meaning, Transformation and Praxis

I am conscious of my positionality, role and responsibility to the Amerindian communities, conservationists, animal beings and Guyanese society as an “insider/outsider” researcher (Peake and Trotz, 1999) of Guyanese-Amerindian-Chinese and Dutch-Roma heritage, yet raised and educated in a North American context. As a researcher trained within the Western academic tradition but also embodying Amerindian and non-Western cultural knowledge, how do I negotiate a discursive language that is honest to both my locations? A reflection from Hermes (1998) on her own location as an insider-outsider researcher of Aboriginal and mixed-race heritage, raised off reservation but “going home” to an Ojibwe reservation to work and do dissertation research – directly resonates with my own experience. “Going back means touching a place of the past and the future that belongs to all of us detribalized, adopted out, colonized, and made-not-to-feel-at-home people. “Going back” means remembering to touch the places that bring us together, “going back” means I am not from there, the way someone raised there is, means I will never be a part of that community in that same way, but it also means no better and no worse.” I am also aware of the structures of complexity and power that inherently frame relationships between: researchers and local peoples; researchers and external experts; external experts and local peoples; and different constituencies within communities. It is extremely important that the terms, representation, relative privilege and power relations framing my fieldwork are negotiated equitably with other knowledge-holders and that the outcomes are carefully thought through by all participants before the research is undertaken.

Inspired by Lotz-Sisitka’s (2002) metaphor of the research process being a “weaving enterprise”, my ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches form threads woven throughout

my research, writing and my personal engagement with the research project and the communities in Guyana. Smith (1999) defines indigenous (or indigenizing) methodologies as a combination of decolonized social science methodological frameworks and indigenous practices that can be applied to research on indigenous issues. The premise of indigenizing methodology is to challenge and deconstruct the colonial discourse that continues to define and shape the questions, analysis, instruments and methods employed by much of Western research theory and practice. Once the methodological frameworks have been decolonized, the next challenge is to determine how such methodologies can meaningfully contribute to indigenous knowledge and discourse. As well as weaving together different methodological approaches, theory and methods, I will also incorporate different voices (personal, Amerindian, and conservationist voices) and perceptions within my research. I also intend to work from within a partnership research model to collaborate with Amerindian and conservation communities of inquiry, as well as engage with both communities in a long-term relationship. The key assumptions that I wish to address are within a partnership research model (adapted from Ulloa et al., 2004 and Smith, 1999) are:

- ? Participation of different knowledge-holders: promotes the presence, agency and opinions of all actors during the entire process (particularly community members traditionally excluded). Participation is based on respect for differences and centrality of Amerindian knowledge-holders.
- ? Autonomy: decision-making and agency of Amerindian people with respect to their conceptions and uses of territory and wildlife.
- ? Equity: equality in power relations and political conditions based on the differences between each knowledge-holder, thus generating respectful dialogue and the construction of shared meaning and practice.
- ? Interculturality: facilitates the exchange of different ways of knowledge, acting, interpreting and representation between traditional and conservation science discourses and cultures.
- ? Interdisciplinarity: joint vision by the social and natural science disciplines in envisioning, collaborating and problem-solving.
- ? Communication: explores the different systems of conceptualization, epistemology and representation between Amerindian and conservation science discourses. Oral and written communications are transmitted and articulated in culturally appropriate media and language and complemented by graphical, auditory and artistic materials to socialize information.

- ? Partnership: indigenous and conservation knowledge-holders/researchers shape the structure, objectives and methodology of the research project together – thereby co-constructing and sharing knowledge, meaning and praxis.
- ? Continuity: a long-term process of engagement and relationship between the researcher and knowledge-holders that goes beyond the parameters of the research project.

Conclusion

In conservation and natural resource management policy and field discourses there is a push toward adaptive management through the integration of traditional ecological knowledge and scientific ecological knowledge and application. While a synthesis may be inevitable and beneficial in the long-term sustainability of ecosystem and wildlife conservation, the process and ontological issues must be problematized. An important distinction must first be made between Amerindian peoples' substantive ecological knowledge which is dynamic, embodied and adaptive and the formal linguistically-encoded conservation knowledge which has often been passively adapted extraneous to their worldviews and experiences. How can formal conservation or scientific knowledge relevant to Amerindian stewardship approaches be learned in a way that is more dynamic and adaptive to Amerindian conceptualizations and experiences? A collaboration between indigenous knowledge and conservation knowledge entails going beyond a middle ground. The epistemological processes, values, and agency of both conservation science and indigenous knowledge discourses must be analyzed within their historical and political frames - as separate systems and in relation to one another. Specifically, a meaningful critique of power relations, power-sharing, and the terms and agency of knowledge is required to meaningfully understand the nature, transformative potential, omissions, and consequences of such a synthesis (Odora Hoppers, 2002). How do researchers and conservationists discursively represent Amerindian knowledge, practice and aspirations without politically appropriating them - as has already been done within many academic discourses (Radcliffe, 1994)? As the direct descendants of their traditional knowledge systems, Amerindian peoples should be the first beneficiaries of knowledge that they have co-constructed with conservationists and researchers in their territories. Thus, the ownership and use of knowledge must move in a meaningful direction for all members of the community so that asymmetries of power between different constituencies within the communities are not reinforced. Moreover, how will the knowledge contribute to social and

ecological transformation toward equitable and sustainable wildlife stewardship and cultural practices by Amerindian communities in a healthy forest ecosystem?

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