

Development Through Ecotourism in the Interior of Suriname

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ABSTRACT

METS (Maatschappij tot Exploitatie van Toeristische verblijven in Suriname), which translates as Company for the Exploitation of Tourism Lodges, realizes that uncontrolled tourism can bring damage to both nature and culture. Also known as the Suriname Tourism Company Limited, this organization's policy is to limit the number of visitors (maximum fifteen visitors per tour at a resort). METS is also creating an atmosphere whereby citizens in the interior (Amerindians & Maroons) are made aware of the guideline that "respect for yourself, respect for others, respect for your village, respect for your country," is very important. Elderly people keep their culture intact, while youngsters are leaning heavily on city life. This process of respecting traditional culture is done together with elderly citizens. Youngsters are informed again and again why it is important to have their own identity. In this way, what the government cannot afford, due to the poor economy, is 'covered' by METS.

GENERAL

Suriname, formerly Dutch Guiana (163,265 sq km) lies on the northeastern coast of South America. The national language is Dutch and the population consists of 406,000 citizens. Hindustanis (East Indians) are the majority, followed by blacks, Javanese (from Indonesia), Chinese, Europeans, and most importantly Amerindians, the first inhabitants of Suriname. Another culturally important group of citizens are the Maroons, descendants of run-away slaves. Five Amerindian tribes and six Maroon tribes inhabit the Surinamese interior. Respect for nature is very important in their culture. Both Amerinidians and Maroons have kept their culture intact, making it unique for Suriname and the world. In fact, the Maroon culture in Suriname has been kept intact for more than 200 years. This part of African culture has vanished even in Africa.

The aforementioned information illustrates that Suriname holds the potential to offer tourism. Suriname is unknown, and unspoilt, thus creating a good base to attract visitors worldwide. Taking into account that more and more visitors are longing for exotic, unknown, and unspoilt destinations, Suriname might turn out to be a very important tourism destination in the future. After all, the nation offers traditional culture at its best, since two thirds of its area is still covered with rainforest—assets, which, if correctly managed, are extremely important in the development of Suriname.

Yet, Suriname has no real tourism tradition, even though it was the first country in South America to erect a tourism office in New York during the seventies. The 1970s were a tourism boom period

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for Suriname, with a peak of approximately 40,000 visitors per year. Political instability during the 1980s brought a halt to the development of tourism. Democracy was finally restored in 1991, when a new democratically elected government was installed. During this new era, tourism was re-established when the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Tourism was created. Suriname was to be promoted again as a destination having a unique cosmopolitan society in one of the most remote areas of the world—a country with unknown nature tourism possibilities.

SURINAME TOURISM COMPANY LIMITED (METS)

With the new Ministry of Transport, Communications and Tourism (simply called Ministry of Tourism), measures needed to be taken to encourage development of the tourism sector. One such measure was taken in 1992 to reactivate the government owned METS (Maatschappij tot Exploitatie van Toeristische verblijven in Suriname), translated in English as Company for the Exploitation of Tourism Lodges. Reactivating METS meant that, functioning as a tour operator, the company would support the initiatives of indigenous inhabitants and develop tourist activities.

The involvement of the indigenous population (Amerindians and Maroons) was manifested by means of:

- cooperative agreements with owners of facilities
- management of METS facilities by local inhabitants
- promoting goods and services from local inhabitants
- providing education, public health, and other primary benefits in cooperation with responsible parties
- reevaluation of traditional culture

But the METS philosophy reaches further and includes these objectives:

- facilities for visitors must be set up in a traditional style using local materials
- tours must be for leisure and information on rainforest, flora, and fauna
- activities must be executed in such a way that the impact on nature and culture is minimized

METS is an ecologically-oriented organization offering nature tourism at three resorts in the Surinamese interior. Palumeu is in southern Suriname where three Amerindian tribes have their living area. Kumalu and Awarradam are located near the Saramaka, the biggest Maroon tribe in Suriname.

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As mentioned before, METS was reactivated by the Suriname government and was given the task of setting standards for tourism development in Suriname. METS uses the following definition for ecotourism: “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” [Ecotourism Society].

No matter how interesting a product may be, rules regarding minimizing impacts on nature and culture will be considered by visitors as they choose their tour operators. Therefore, METS limits the number of visitors to a resort to fifteen people per tour. Local guides inform visitors in advance what to expect when going to indigenous villages. Leaflets are given to visitors with relevant information on traditional culture, nature preservation, and tourism activities as a whole. Cultural and ecological awareness is created, which is a good base for getting visitors to respect the rainforest and its inhabitants.

Employees are also being educated. They are told that garbage needs to be brought back to the capital, Paramaribo, for responsible processing. They explain to tourists why holiday houses are built in the traditional Amerindian or Maroon style. The guides are taught a golden rule: respect yourself, respect others, respect your village, respect your country. We believe that METS has measurements in place to keep the impact on nature and culture at a very minimum level, but it is still difficult to have a good balance between tourism, conservation, and culture.

METS considers itself an organization aiming to create a general awareness of ecotourism. Amerindians and Maroons operate METS activities at all resorts. Guides, boatmen, and housekeeping are some examples of jobs that they hold. METS, as stated earlier, creates an awareness of self-respect by informing citizens how important it is to have a unique identity. Cultural pride is a long lost feeling, which, thanks to the METS awareness programme, is becoming popular again. Both Amerindians and Maroons want to share their culture with others by providing visitors with information. Thus, the way is paved for having a “controlled system” within a village. Villagers see to it that bad influences from outside are banned. For example, due to the poor economy, rich people sometimes pay money to partake in activities such as hunting in the living area of Amerindians. But since awareness is clear among the Amerindians that present and future generations will benefit from certain rules, hunting is not permitted by our friends from the interior. Amerindians and Maroons see to it that everyone, including personnel from METS, stick to the rules.

We cannot say that we have noticed any specific impact on cul-

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ture and nature yet. As mentioned earlier, control is provided by local citizens themselves, after being trained by METS. If one would throw a beer can somewhere, for instance, a local guide will politely ask him or her to pick it up since everything is brought to Paramaribo (the Surinamese capital) for responsible processing. The awareness in the interior is, as it used to be, at a very high level. For the most part, the impacts on culture and nature are measured by citizens themselves.

CONCLUSION

Development through nature tourism in Suriname has had several advantages. Since the economy is poor, tourism activities can be a tool for development. Nature tourists who are keen on traditional culture make use of local resources and expertise, thus creating employment in that particular area. METS is aware of the disadvantages mass tourism will bring, and will not allow large numbers of tourists to visit the interior. The company is aware that ecotourism is a sustainable development issue and strict planning must be guaranteed.

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Jerry A-Kum is currently the Public Relations Officer at METS, Suriname Tourism Company, the leading tour operator in Suriname. He was a wildlife ranger before entering the ecotourism field in 1993, when he joined METS. He has taken marketing courses at the PDU in London, and from the Caribbean Tourism Organization in Paramaribo. The latter made him one of the trainers for guides in Suriname. He writes for several publications and is co-founder of the Suriname Tourguides Association. His main goal is to further the development of Surinamese tourism, especially in the country's interior.

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