



Searching for catfish. Photo: J. Campbell.



Photo: FOTONATURA.

SAVING THE FOREST BY CATCHING AQUARIUM FISH

Harvesting aquarium fish from tropical forest streams and lakes can be a promising income-generating activity for local people, as this case in Guyana demonstrates. Because aquarium fishery is highly sensitive to forest disturbance, it also encourages local communities to conserve natural resources. A small grant helped to establish a viable community-based business that achieved financial sustainability in the space of just a few years.

The richly biodiverse and largely intact Iwokrama Forest and the Rupununi Wetlands in Central Guyana are home to several endangered species and to a major fish spawning area. The area has been made the first protected Ramsar site in the country. Nevertheless, the forest and the wetlands are under human pressure as a result of non-sustainable exploitation and minimal local and national awareness. Therefore, sustainable alternatives were being sought.

ACTIVITIES After extensive debate, several income-generating activities have been proposed by community members for development under an integrated natural resource management plan for the whole area. Aquarium fishery was identified by all relevant stakeholders as a promising nature-based economic activity with minimal ecological impacts. These stakeholders include leaders from the 14 communities in the area, private sector aquarium fish traders and the government. The aquarium fish business provides economic incentives to conserve the tropical forest because many of the harvested species depend on food sources from flooded forest areas and overhanging trees to survive.

Through the project, community fishery staff were trained in financial management and administration. Additionally, marketing studies have been made and a three-year business plan was prepared that focuses on strategic alliances between exporters and importers in the USA and the EU. The business focuses on catfish to enable low volume harvesting of high value fishes, but other fish groups like cichlids are also harvested, in smaller quantities. Nine shipments were completed during the project, generating total revenue of over 13,000 US\$.

IMPACT The working community-based business was established earlier than originally projected and also achieved financial sustainability ahead of target. Traders have managed to transform the project from a donor-funded initiative to a self-sustaining business operation that may contribute to the conservation of a much larger forest area. By developing an ecological and socially sustainable harvesting and export programme the initiative has served as an important model for the management of the aquarium fish and wildlife trades in Guyana. Iwokrama hopes to influence South America's aquarium trade by introducing a certified 'green equity' trade, resulting in regulation of the presently unregulated industry.



Photo: J.E.Bicknell.

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