

Maximizing the benefits of conservation to Development through the Conservation Concession Concept

Introduction

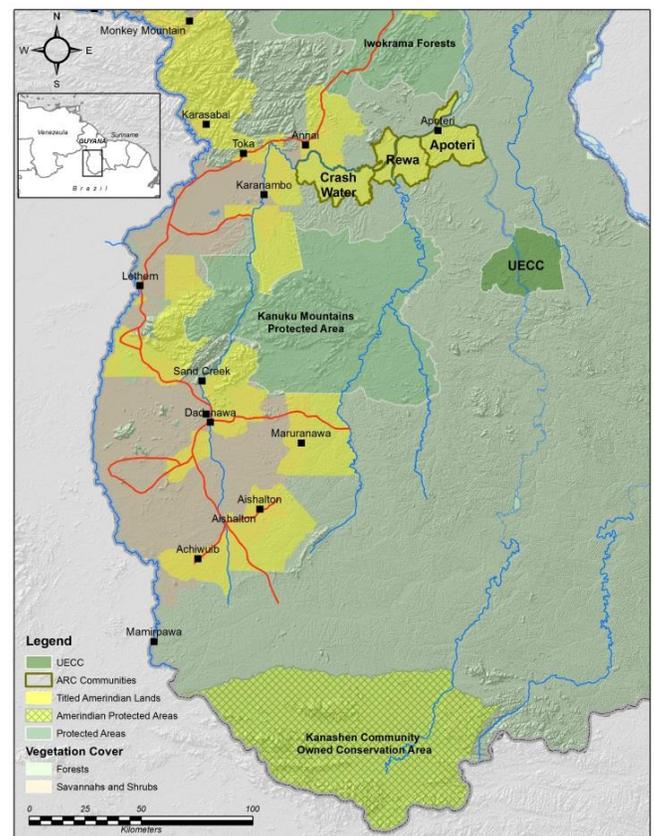
At the turn of the new millennium in Guyana, national policies demonstrated a preference for natural resource extraction for short-term economic benefits (CI-Guyana, 2002, 2007, 2013; Ellison, 2003), and biodiversity conservation was treated as a cost to economic development. Though several policies and legislation for environmental protection were already established, few of them provided incentives for conservation over and above demonstrating compliance to environmentally sound behavior. Legislation for forest management made no provision to treat conservation within the State Forest Estate as a mechanism for revenue generation ("Forest Act," 1953). Additionally, there was no specific legislation for protected area development and management. Continued maintenance of Guyana's increasingly valuable biological assets was therefore not an attractive investment opportunity within this policy and legislative context.

The Conservation Concession Concept

An easement type concept of a Conservation Concession was introduced by Conservation International-Guyana (CI-Guyana) in Guyana to demonstrate the value of biodiversity conservation (CI-Guyana, 2013; Ellison, 2003; Rice, 2002), with a view towards catalyzing change in policies and legislation (CI-Guyana, 2013). This concept proposed providing competitive financial and other benefits to the state and other stakeholders for the right to maintain the standing timber stock and conserve biodiversity in a portion of the State Forest Estate (CI-Guyana, 2013). In 2002, CI-Guyana was issued a 30-year lease to 82,199 hectares in the Upper Essequibo region (Figure 1) for management as a conservation concession (CI-Guyana, 2013; Ellison, 2003; Rice, 2002). CI-Guyana managed the Upper Essequibo Conservation Concession (UECC) for ten years (CI-Guyana, 2013) over which time the legislative and policy environment in Guyana was

significantly transformed ("Forest Act," 2009; GFC, 2012; OP, 2013).

Figure 1: Map showing location of the Upper Essequibo Conservation Concession (CI-Guyana, 2013).



Results/Outputs

Management of the UECC has demonstrated the integration of biodiversity conservation into economic planning, growth and development. Management of the site for conservation rather than extraction maintained biological integrity while simultaneously ensuring that economic and other benefits accrued to stakeholders, in particular the State and communities (CI-Guyana,

2013). The successful demonstration of the prospects of the concept has influenced the inclusion of specific provisions for “forest conservation operations”, defined as “the preservation of forests for the purpose of carbon sequestration or any other form of environmental services; the conservation of biological diversity; and eco-tourism” (Section 2) (“Forest Act,” 2009) in revised forest legislation.

Challenges and Lessons

Examination of the UECC experience presents several valuable lessons for incorporating biodiversity conservation into Guyana’s policy and legislative framework that favours sustainable development, described as a low carbon or green economy (CI-Guyana, 2013). Global understanding of the importance of tropical forest conservation to efforts to minimize climate change impacts is growing, and REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation plus forest conservation) has emerged as an important tool that mainstreams conservation in economic development. With the right conditions – including clear allocation of rights to ecosystem goods and services, equitable distribution of costs and benefits, and innovative finance and management requirements – conservation concessions can be an important pillar in the sustainable management of forest resources (Bernard, 2014), standing alongside traditional forestry and NTFP extraction in its own right.

Conclusion

Conservation concessions demonstrate one tested means by which Guyana can begin to move from continued dependence on extraction and conversion of ecosystems for economic growth to a more integrated development model, especially within the context of a national REDD+ programme. The experiences of the management of the UECC provide a sound basis for further development of the enabling conditions for successful management of conservation concessions in changing global and national conditions.

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