

# Executive Summary

## INTRODUCTION

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### **The Guayana Shield Region**

The Guayana Shield Region of northern South America (approx. 8°N, 72°W) was formed during the Precambrian era and is one of the most ancient landscapes in the world. The terms Guiana and Guayana are two universally accepted variants of an Amerindian word interpreted to mean “land of plenty water.” Participants of the Guayana Shield Priority Setting Workshop (Huber and Foster 2003) identified the Guayana Shield as the area bounded by the Amazon River to the south, the Japura-Caqueta River to the southwest, the Sierra de Chiribiquere to the west, the Orinoco and Guaviare rivers to the northwest and north, and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. This area covers 2.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of mountains, pristine forests, wetlands and savannahs, and is comprised of parts of Venezuela, Brazil and Colombia and all of Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. The Guayana Shield occupies approximately 13% of the entire South American continent (Hammond 2005). Recognized as one of the world’s largest remaining areas of tropical wilderness, the Guayana Shield Region is also home to a wide variety of unique ecosystems (e.g. tepui or table-top mountains), harbors a large number of endemic fauna and flora, and supports a high level of cultural diversity with more than 100 indigenous ethnic groups, most of whose cultures remain relatively unblemished and are intimately dependent upon the natural resources of the region for their sustenance.

### **Guyana**

Guyana is located on the northern coast of South America and is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the north, Suriname to the east, Venezuela to the west and Brazil to the south and southwest. Several features distinguish Guyana’s forests from other regions of the world. A primary distinction is that 80% of the country is forested and 75% of this remains relatively intact. This is one of the highest percentages of pristine tropical habitat for any country. Other distinguishable features include the underlying geologically old Guayana Shield, close proximity to the biologically rich Amazon Basin, low population density and an interior that is relatively inaccessible. These factors have contributed to Guyana’s richness in biodiversity and biologically important habitats.

The temperature is tropical with average high daily temperatures of 25.9 °C and average high rainfall of 4400 mm per year. The major geographic regions include the narrow coastal strip (occupied by more than 75% of the national population) which is basically a floodplain that lies approximately 2 m below sea level at high tide and is dissected by estuaries of 16 rivers, streams, creeks and canals for drainage and irrigation, the hilly white sandy region lying just behind the coastal plain, the savannahs in the central and south-western parts of the country, and the highland regions of the Acarai, Imataka, Kanuku and Pakaraima mountain ranges.

Guyana’s large expanses of freshwater ecosystems include the Essequibo River – the third largest water source in South America. The numerous waterways intermix annually with tributaries of the Amazon River (for example, the Rio Negro and Rio Branco River) during the rainy season when the banks overflow and flood the Rupununi Savannahs. This connectivity facilitates trans-boundary migration of biodiversity – especially species seeking refuge from the more impacted places such as Roraima State in neighboring Brazil.

Additionally, Guyana has a wealth of species with many yet to be discovered and recorded. To date, knowledge of the country’s biodiversity includes more than 7,000 species of plants