

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The Guiana Shield is a vast tropical wilderness covering over 2.2 million square kilometers and encompassing all or part of six South American countries (Hammond 2005). The numerous biomes of the Guiana Shield have fostered the evolution of an exceptionally rich flora and fauna with many endemic species. More than 20,000 species of vascular plants, 1,000 species of birds, and 1,100 species of freshwater fishes are known from the Guiana Shield (Huber and Foster 2003; Hollowell and Reynolds 2005; Vari et al. 2009). The region's tumultuous cultural history and general remoteness from large population centers have effectively limited environmental degradation on a large scale. As a result, much of the Guiana Shield remains forested, presenting an invaluable opportunity to set conservation goals and develop ecologically and socially responsible strategies for resource use (Huber and Foster 2003; Hammond 2005).

Suriname is entirely contained within the Guiana Shield region and is mostly covered by lowland rainforest. Although most of the human population lives on the coastal plain, many Maroon and Amerindian communities are found in the interior—the former mostly along rivers in the eastern half of the country, and the latter primarily in the far southern and western regions. Much of southern and western Suriname is sparsely populated, and wildlife is abundant.

However, the isolation that has protected Suriname's ecosystems, natural resources, and indigenous cultures is coming to an end, and the opportunity to take action to preserve these remarkable resources may soon be gone. Record high commodity prices have encouraged the spread of illegal gold miners from Brazil across the region, spurred potential major hydropower and mining investments, and provided the incentive to press ahead with road and dam projects.

One of the first steps needed to develop conservation and management plans for Suriname is to collect baseline biological and socio-economic data. Suriname currently lacks the scientific capacity to conduct multi-taxa biodiversity field surveys needed to make sound resource management decisions for the country. Increasing Suriname's scientific capacity is critical to ensuring long-term conservation of the country's biodiversity and promoting sustainable development for Suriname's people. This RAP survey was conducted to incorporate national scientific capacity and train local students, scientists and community members in biodiversity assessment and monitoring methods, as RAP has done before in previous surveys in Suriname (Alonso and Berrenstein 2006, Alonso and Mol 2007).

THE KWAMALASAMUTU REGION

The indigenous settlement of Kwamalasamutu (N 02.3561°, W 056.7945°) is situated on the north bank of the Sipaliwini River in southwest Suriname, approximately 10 kilometers upriver from the confluence of the Sipaliwini and Coeroeni Rivers, which together form the main eastern tributary of the Corantijn River flowing north to the Atlantic Ocean (see Map, page 13). The village of Kwamalasamutu was officially created in 1975. Different small nomadic tribes