
Developing indigenous tourism: challenges for the Guianas

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Abstract

As emergent tourism destinations, the Guianas are new players in a game in which rules have been agreed, strategies defined and competition has been intense. New players succeed by demonstrating creativity and innovation and by seizing comparative advantage. The possession of unique natural attractions, the presence of indigenous communities or rare cultural forms are all precious resources commanding comparative advantage for the Guianas. However, because of the special character of indigenous tourism, development of that form of tourism is not possible without the articulation and implementation of appropriate policy measures. In the absence of that policy infrastructure the possibilities for error and conflict are immense. This paper explores the key challenges in the path of the development of indigenous tourism and suggests clear policy guidelines that should inform the development of indigenous tourism in the pursuit of comparative advantage.

Introduction

The Guianas comprise three territories – Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana – on the north-eastern shoulder of the South American continent. Although much similarity in demographics, topography and economic condition exists among these three territories, the paper will focus primarily on the development of indigenous tourism in two of the Guianas, which are part of the Caricom (Caribbean Community and Common Market) grouping – Guyana and Suriname. French Guiana is still an overseas department of France and does not, at the moment, envision a Caribbean destiny.

In view of the political reality of the Caricom status of Guyana and Suriname, there are distinct merits in the discussion of tourism development methodologies for Guyana and Suriname within a Caricom framework, especially with technical assistance from the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO). The other imperative which justifies (or certainly makes urgent) a bi-lateral initiative on tourism development for Guyana and Suriname is the growing need to define fruitful and constructive areas of cooperation to counterbalance and defuse tensions issuing from unresolved territorial questions between the two countries. Cooperation in areas such as tourism development and sustainable uses of the environment will do much to strengthen goodwill and enhance the sense of shared destiny between both populations.

The appropriate tourism

Guyana and Suriname are both former European colonies on the continent of South America. Both countries possess vast,

sparsely inhabited interiors that are rich in natural resources, and both are seeking alternatives to the, now declining, extractive industries that dominated their economies for many decades. Both regard tourism as bearing the potential to introduce handsome economic rewards and both Guyana and Suriname recognize the resources of their interiors – the diversity of flora, fauna and ancient indigenous cultures – as the base of that development.

Although the form of tourism commonly known as eco-tourism features as a priority in tourism development in both Guyana and Suriname, the main focus of this paper will be on what may be regarded as a sub-set of eco-tourism – indigenous tourism. The flora and fauna, rapids, waterfalls, which both countries possess, are promoted as the context for a unique experience of nature. Regardless of the intense debates in tourism circles in both countries regarding the suitability or appropriateness of the “eco” label, there is consensus on what should comprise the essence of that unique experience of nature that is the sought-after prize of much modern travel.

Indigenous tourism forms part of that now copiously referenced cluster of tourism alternatives (Smith and Eadington, 1992). Hinch and Butler (1996) define indigenous tourism as:

... tourism activity in which indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction.

Smith (1996) perceives indigenous tourism as:

... that segment of the visitor industry which directly involves native peoples whose ethnicity is a tourist attraction.



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Smith's definition immediately introduces a complexity, one that has to be squarely and comprehensively addressed by those emergent tourism destinations anxious to maximize earnings from the development of indigenous tourism. Essentially, that complexity revolves around the operationalisation of ethnicity as a tourist attraction without inducing behaviours and postures that are demeaning on the part of tourists.

Forte (1993) is very sensitive to this possibility in her assertion that Amerindian peoples in Guyana should not be the tourism attraction *per se*, but that visits should offer tourists an understanding and appreciation of the lifestyles of the Amerindians. The attraction in that sense would not be Amerindians but "Amerindian-ness". Therein lies one of the key challenges for indigenous tourism in the Guianas – to structure the indigenous tourism experience in such a manner as to guarantee the greatest integrity to the indigenous people and their lifestyles, even as the demands of the tourists are being satisfied.

The last two decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a very sharp focus on the interests and rights of indigenous peoples. 1982 saw the constitution of the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples. In 1992, 500 years after Columbus was discovered by indigenous peoples, a chorus of voices gave expression to the modern plight of indigenous peoples. In 1993, designated as the United Nations International Year of Indigenous Peoples, the Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights was drafted.

This ferment of deliberation and even protest, centring on indigenous peoples, now constitutes a formidable moral and ideological backdrop against which any national enterprise that is based on indigenous peoples, their lands, cultures, traditions and lifestyles will be judged. In this first decade of the twenty-first century there now exist not only indigenous populations and advocates that are more informed and militant, but also more protocols, checks and safeguards governing activity that impinges on the lives of indigenous peoples.

It is in this supra-national context that the development of indigenous tourism in Guyana and Suriname will be occurring. There are almost generic complexities and challenges that attend this development. In that circumstance, policies and protocols that enjoy the commitment of all stakeholders will be vital instruments in guaranteeing development of a form of

tourism that will enhance the welfare of indigenous peoples in Guyana and Suriname.

Comparative advantage

For emergent tourism destinations, especially in the Caribbean, sun, sand and sea tourism would hardly be a major source of comparative advantage. The more mature destinations in the Caribbean – the Bahamas, Jamaica, Antigua and Barbados – have long since refined that form of tourism and are even now challenged to retain market share (Holder, 1996). The reality of this market challenge has impelled traditional sun-sand-sea destinations in the Caribbean to consider and propose alternative resources and experiences to drive product differentiation.

The growth of the now copiously referenced "alternative tourism" market has been characterised by a desire on the part of travellers to enjoy experiences that are more rounded than has been the traditional reward of mass tourism. A growing segment of the tourism market has shown an interest in going beyond (sometimes well beyond) the beach; in pursuing attractions and experiences that are available only in the deep interior recesses of distant lands. Those countries that possess rare and abundant biodiversity and can point to remote or indigenous communities practising cultural forms that are different from the dominant, Westernised traditions are in a position to exploit comparative advantage in the tourism market.

Strong economic stimulus exists in Guyana and Suriname for the exploitation of comparative advantage in tourism. Both countries have been experiencing declines in foreign exchange earnings deriving from traditional export commodities. In Guyana, reduced earnings from sugar, rice and bauxite have contributed to a precarious balance of payments situation. In Suriname, a similar scenario exists where declines in earnings have led to an unfavourable balance of payment equation, which has in turn led to the precipitous depreciation in the value of the local currency – the Suriname guilder – against most major currencies.

The fact that both Guyana and Suriname postponed the embrace of tourism for a number of decades can possibly be explained in two ways. First, both countries possessed a significant stock of natural resources that could be exploited for economic development. Guyana embarked on export-led development with sugar, rice, bauxite, timber and minerals as the leading lights. For Suriname,

bauxite, gold and timber were the flagship industries. Second, during more than four decades of the dominance of traditional blue waters Caribbean tourism both Guyana and Suriname found themselves, for reasons geographic, outside (or farther south of) this blue waters sorority. The days of black waters tourism would come later, when tourism itself would move beyond the beach.

The product – Suriname

What do Guyana and Suriname possess that would be a key attraction to a growing segment of the tourism market and would serve as the basis of comparative advantage? The focus of this paper will be on those communities and cultural resources that are being described as indigenous and that will be cited as the resource for the development of indigenous tourism.

Bush Negroes (or Maroons as referred to by some sources) comprise 10 per cent of the population of Suriname; Amerindians 3 per cent. The lifestyles and cultural forms of both peoples reflect, in varying degrees, their strong ancestral base and corresponding distance from and resistance to European cultural influences. Although many Surinamese of either Bush Negro or Amerindian origin speak fluent Dutch – the official language – as well as Sranantong – the most widely used vernacular – the majority speak their traditional ancestral language and live in traditional communities. These communities are usually in remote districts and boast a complex form of social organisation. The relative remoteness of these communities reflects the historical imperative to be independent of the reaches of the plantation system.

Apart from language, the cultural distinctness of these communities is manifested in a number of other visible ways. Dwelling in the communities is along communal lines. In the Bush Negro community of Santigron, for example, thatched roof huts belonging to several families are clustered together. Endogamy is practised and is the traditional expectation. Deviations from that norm do occur but are frowned on, and considerable communal pressure is visited on the deviants.

Religion is central to life in both Amerindian and Bush Negro villages. Visitors are often shown a public space, regarded by the community with great reverence because of its association with ritual activity. Not all Bush Negro rituals are accessible to tourists. Some are exclusive to the practitioners themselves and often entail

communion with ancestors of the villagers. Burial spaces, for example, are off-limits to visitors to the Bush Negro village. The role of the village chief, as chief officiant in these rituals, is pivotal. The Chief (or Deputy Chief if the latter is absent) is the resident authority who settles disputes in the village, advises on matters pertaining to the welfare of the village, and sanctions or refuses visits and tours to the community.

Indigenous tourism in Suriname therefore involves visits and tours to the Bush Negro and Amerindian communities. Bush Negro communities tend to receive more visits than Amerindian villages. That fact is by no means a judgement upon the appeal or authenticity of Amerindian cultural practices; it is simply a statement of the more advanced development and organised nature of Bush Negro tourism in Suriname. *Arinze* tours, *Kumalu Island Adventure* and *Mena Reizen* are the foremost Bush Negro-managed tour operations in Suriname.

The product – Guyana

Guyana has no Bush Negro population, but its indigenous or Amerindian population comprises 7 per cent of the population and is the third largest racial grouping. Writers often draw attention to the difficult history of Amerindians in Guyana. Fox and Danns (1993) assert:

Amerindians in Guyana have historically existed under conditions of continuous threat.

Amerindians have also been described as being:

... the poorest and most neglected stratum of Guyanese society (Forte, 1995).

Rendall (1995) comments on their having:

... suffered a long history of marginalisation, both before and since independence.

The majority of Amerindians live a traditional lifestyle in coastal or remote interior districts, but (as in the case of the Bush Negroes of Suriname) numbers of Amerindian residents live and work in coastal and urban areas, practising lifestyles that are no different from those of the urbanised Guyanese of any other race. Traditional life for Amerindians in the interior:

... is a very laborious one, due to their subsistence on the slash and burn (shifting) cultivation of traditional crops, most importantly, bitter cassava (manioc), corn, yams, peanuts and sweet cassava, supplemented by wild fruits when in season.

Hunting and fishing are still practised to varying degrees with bows, firearms, fish poisons and nets (Rendall, 1995).

Today, a more complex economy has placed at the disposal of the Amerindian a wider variety of pursuits and means of earning a livelihood. Timber, balata and gold production have lured many (especially male) Amerindians into those economic activities, thereby creating a more complex picture of the Amerindian condition than the traditional perspective suggests.

In summary, there exists in both Guyana and Suriname communities of indigenous peoples who practise lifestyles that are strongly traditional and in many cases bearing strong allegiance to ancestral traditions. The lifestyles, cultural forms and practices of these peoples have stimulated the curiosity of visitors and tourism now integral to the lives and economic well-being of these communities.

In an article appearing in *Time* magazine Foroohar (2002), discussing this new vogue in travel, writes:

A new kind of travel is in vogue now. Savvier tourists are abandoning the mock-European high-rises for more authentic experiences, like horseback riding through the bush (Foroohar, 2002).

The author continues:

In many ways, this off-the-beaten path vacation represents the future of global tourism – an industry on the verge of tremendous growth and change (Foroohar, 2002).

The operation of tourism in these communities presents a number of very urgent challenges that require responses at the level of policy intervention and regulation if tourism is to succeed in a sustainable way, safeguarding and enhancing the interests and welfare of the visited, indigenous communities. These challenges need first to be understood, then faced and addressed squarely, with the appropriate principles and guidelines informing policy formulation and implementation.

Challenges

The discussion of the challenges facing indigenous tourism in some ways revisits an earlier proposition advanced by Smith (1996). Consciously departing from the “four S” (sun/sand/sea/sex) structure of mass tourism that is pervasive in tourism literature, Smith offers a “four H” structure. Smith (1996) asserts:

The tourism literature has adopted the four S acronym to describe beach resort tourism, a lifestyle often associated with charter mass tourism, tropical cruises, and “drifter” tourism. The four Hs – habitat, heritage, history and handicrafts – similarly describe the indigenous tourism phenomenon, as a culture-bounded visitor experience which, quite literally, is a micro-study of man-land relationships.

Smith’s (1996) perception of the indigenous tourism phenomenon as “culture-bounded” is accurate, and her identification of heritage, history, habitat and handicraft lends support (albeit with some overlap) to that perception. However, Smith’s perspective on “history” as referring “specifically to post-contact relations between Aboriginal peoples and Westerners who later occupied the lands and established the present governments” (Smith, 1996) abbreviates the sweep of indigenous history and limits its expression in tourism. Conceiving of, and presenting, indigenous history as “post-contact” history locates indigenous tourism within the time-frame of post-contact acculturation.

The first challenge for indigenous tourism is therefore conceptual – defining its temporal parameters. That definition will determine not only the concept of indigenous history and tourism, but also the construction of the indigenous tourist stage – what is selected for “consumption” and what remains hidden and unacknowledged. This challenge has strong implications for cultural, particularly museum, policy. The Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology in Guyana, with artefacts dating way before “contact” history, is inspired by (and presents to the visitor) a much more inclusive view of indigenous history.

Refining the product

If Foroohar (2002) is right in asserting that off-the-beaten-track tourism represents a new trend in travel, then indigenous tourism in the two Guianas is being developed at an auspicious time. If growing numbers of travellers are in fact seeking more authentic experiences, then the marketing of this brand of tourism – always a key challenge – will have been favoured. The next imperative will be to refine the product (understood simply as the integration of accommodations, attractions and services) and commence effective marketing.

Visiting communities that reside in remote or deep-interior regions requires a commitment on the part of a tour

establishment to compliance with the most scrupulous and professional operational standards. These apply across the spectrum and include the following:

- Safe, reliable, efficient and appropriate modes of transportation – the jet-boat may roar its passengers swiftly through narrow streams en route to the remote community, but are there negative human and environmental consequences created by the huge swells of the jet-boat?
- The quality of tour-guiding services at the disposal of the visitor.
- Standards in accommodation facilities available for visitors.
- Professional interpretation and presentation of indigenous cultural forms and traditions through the judicious employment of knowledge-bearing materials and artefacts.

Product integrity

Great care needs to be exercised in the refinement and presentation of the indigenous tourism product. Product refinement and presentation that introduce styles and “modernisations” that are inappropriate to and incongruous with an authentic indigenous tourism experience run the risk of inducing suspicion in the minds of the visitors that they may have been duped. Worse, such presentations may be an affront to the dignity of the community itself. A debate has begun, for example, about the “eco-tourism casinos” of the Philippines. Also, the not uncommon practice in Suriname where tour operators take into indigenous communities boxed lunches purchased in the city certainly limits opportunity for the visitor to appreciate indigenous cuisine.

On the other hand, product integrity is maintained, for example, in the Bush Negro community of Santigron in Northern Suriname when visitors are put to sleep communally in hammocks under one thatched-roof hut, villager style. Satisfaction of the quest for the authentic must be the paramount imperative in the provision of an experience of indigenous tourism. That objective is sometimes more challenging than it appears, and the process of adaptation to tourism on the part of remote communities is often a very complex undertaking that sometimes results in the falsification of its own cultural identity (Nunez, 1989) or the dilution of local culture (Greenwood, 1989).

Alarms have also been sounded regarding threats from a “tourist monoculture around

the world” (Pera and McLaren, 2002) as well as from biopiracy that occurs under the cloak of ecotourism where numerous:

... scientists, students, tourists and researchers enter into forests to collect information about local plants and eco-systems, stealing bio-diversity and, in some cases attempting to patent life and the stealing of knowledge developed over centuries (Pera and McLaren, 2002).

Marketing

Appropriate and effective marketing is a vital ingredient in the enterprise of indigenous tourism in Guyana and Suriname, if it is to be economically viable and produce rewards for local communities. This is one area for direct policy intervention. The tendency has been noted in both countries for remote, indigenous communities to be visited as the “add-on” experience, while visitors are already in the country. This practice may derive from a number of factors, key among those being the inadequacy of a marketing policy that does not stress the tourism value of that order of experience.

The marketing of indigenous tourism is a matter of some delicacy and sensitivity. Over a decade ago in Guyana, a prominent resort, located in an Amerindian area, caused considerable offence through the publication of an advertisement inviting visitors to “see the exotic Amerindians”. The furore generated prompted the company to withdraw the offending newspaper advertisement. An important challenge in marketing indigenous tourism as well as in the definition of the product is to avoid the suspicion that people are being commodified, or presented as inanimate curios. The marketing of indigenous tourism in Guyana is sometimes made more thorny by the hypersensitivities of some indigenous advocates who sense and scream exploitation at the mere sighting of any icon or representation of anything even remotely associated with the Amerindian way of life.

Policy intervention is therefore appropriate and necessary. Policy confers legitimacy on the development and marketing of indigenous tourism, defines the parameters within which such activity should occur, sanctions the use of Amerindian icons and motifs in promotion and pronounces on the behaviours and practices that would be appropriate for both the entrepreneur and the visitor. Policy intervention must be understood as the responsibility not only of the public sector

directorate (ministry or other agency responsible for tourism administration), but also of those private sector agencies and corporate bodies that have direct responsibility for the management of the tourism operation.

Community involvement

The management of indigenous tourism on the ground must be driven by the principle of indigenous sovereignty over natural and cultural resources that are the basis of the tourism experience, and that principle should under-gird all aspects of the tourism operation. The community should be involved in decisions concerning the number, duration, frequency and schedules of visits, locations to be visited, the payment of visitor fees, the location of visitor accommodations. Meaningful indigenous involvement in every stage of the tourism enterprise ensures the greater possibility that the tourism enterprise would be on the community's terms and developed at a pace and character endorsed by the villagers.

The seminal importance of this prescription was made painfully clear to some tourism consultants in Guyana, in 2001, when they played a conciliatory role in what was shaping up to be an ugly encounter between residents of the Amerindian village of Whyaka and the management of a nearby resort. A complete breakdown in the community/resort relationship had occurred, leading to a considerable degree of mutual antagonism and distrust.

Tourism enterprises not based on this model of indigenous sovereignty can lay the foundation for visitor behaviours that are unacceptable and inappropriate, or for tourism enterprises that may be perceived as exploitative, even "imperialistic" (Nash, 1989).

Conclusion

Indigenous tourism, once recognised as a basis for comparative advantage in Guyana and Suriname, will require development that is sensitive and enlightened if unfortunate experiences are to be avoided. Piore (2002) reports that the rush to develop alternative forms of indigenous tourism sometimes results in dislocation of indigenous peoples. Unless there are clear policy prescriptions that recognise, respect and safeguard indigenous sovereignty over the resource that is the basis of indigenous tourism, an

important infrastructure will be missing. Indigenous sovereignty must take precedence over any other imperative that drives indigenous tourism operations.

If indigenous tourism development is propelled by the logic of the market to the exclusion of other holistic considerations, conflict scenarios will result, similar to the one that threatened to disturb the peace in the village of Whyaka in Guyana. Indigenous sovereignty must take precedence over any other imperative that drives the development of indigenous tourism. In the absence of policy prescriptions that ensure at least the greatest possibility for such sovereignty, an important infrastructure will be missing. Ultimately, tourism will have contributed, unwittingly and inadvertently, to the perpetuation of the historical theme of indigenous exploitation. A simple road map for Guyana and Suriname to move forward could be the following:

- Joint Declaration by Guyana and Suriname of the importance assigned to the development of indigenous tourism and of their commitment to cooperation especially in the area of marketing.
- Convening of a stakeholder consultation in order to generate consensus on precepts, operational guidelines and protocols.
- Design of or amendment to appropriate policy document or drafting of appropriate regulations to govern the management of indigenous tourism enterprises.
- Strict enforcement of protocols (through licensing and sanction arrangements) governing forms of indigenous tourism.

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