

CASE STUDY 2

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SURINAME

Organization: Vereniging van Saamaka Gemeenschappen (VSG)
Region: Latin America and the Caribbean

The Saamaka tribal peoples, descendants of enslaved Africans, live in over 74 villages along the Suriname River. Their ancestral territory spans 1.4 million hectares of tropical rainforest, legally recognized as early as 1762 by Dutch colonial authorities. Over the course of more than two centuries, the Saamaka have preserved this forest through a governance system rooted in customary norms, a rich cultural and spiritual life, and subsistence practices of hunting, fishing, gathering, and small-scale agriculture. Their close relationship with the forest defines both their livelihoods and their cultural identity.

Despite this legacy, the Saamaka face mounting pressures. Since the 1960s, large-scale logging, mining, and road construction have progressively encroached on their lands, undermining traditional conservation systems and causing direct deforestation. Gold mining has destroyed numerous sacred sites, while a dam project led to the loss of at least ten more. Infrastructure projects such as the Palmera road have cut through their forest areas. Insecure tenure exacerbates these challenges. Although the Inter-American Court of Human Rights recognized their collective land rights in the landmark 2007 Saamaka Judgment, the Surinamese state has yet to legally recognize these rights, leaving the community vulnerable to external concessions and exploitation.

The quantitative impacts are stark. Concessions now cover 447,000 hectares, approximately 32% of Saamaka territory. Since the 2007 ruling, 60,855 hectares of forest have been degraded, with 77% of all deforestation and degradation since 1990 occurring after the judgment. Forestry concessions alone account for more than half of this loss. Yet, despite these pressures, the Saamaka territory still maintains 1.1 million hectares of standing forest, characterized by high carbon sequestration, high biodiversity intactness, and 84.2% stable tree cover[30]. As a result, the territory functions as a net carbon sink of 692 ktCO2e per year.[31]

Traditional ecological knowledge continues to guide Saamaka land use and conservation. Land rights are organized through matrilineal clan membership, with each clan responsible for managing a specific forest area. Women play central roles in inheritance, food security, and conservation. Historical agreements designate preserved zones for future generations, in memory of ancestors, for exchange with neighbouring communities, or for spiritual purposes. Rules governing these areas vary, from strict no-use zones to limited use areas, and violations are considered an affront to ancestral agreements. Elders stress the importance of documenting oral traditions to ensure intergenerational transmission of knowledge and to reinforce forest custodianship.

The VSG plays a key role in defending Saamaka rights and ensuring the continuity of sustainable practices. It advocates nationally and internationally for the legal recognition of collective land rights as the foundation for effective conservation and community well-being. By combining customary governance with legal strategies, the Saamaka continue to protect one of the most intact tropical forest landscapes in the region, demonstrating the effectiveness of Indigenous-led land management in maintaining carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots.

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