

Maroons and indigenous people in the Caribbean Amazon: A new environmental self-consciousness

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The Caribbean Amazon (an area comprising Guyana, Suriname and French Guyana, as well as small portions of Brazil and Venezuela) is marked by a relatively narrow coastal strip where the majority of the population resides, and an immense hinterland, sparsely populated by indigenous people, runaway-slaves (maroons) and mixed communities. The countries of the Caribbean Amazon have the highest forest covers in the world, and up to today show relatively low deforestation rates.

Over the past decades, indigenous people have been increasingly involved in efforts to protect and maintain natural areas, biodiversity, and carbon sinks. Research has sought to confirm and explain the more sustainable use of resources among indigenous communities. In Latin America, this area of research interacts with other discussions, about indigenous land rights, the rights of nature, the “ecological Indian”, modernity, and the right to development, to name a few.

In the Caribbean Amazon, such debates have taken place only to a very limited extent. Colonial and post-colonial governments have over the past century consistently attempted to assimilate indigenous/maroon communities into overall society. Interactions with these communities were mainly over the exploitation of natural resources, including gold, bauxite, lumber, and land for hydroelectric projects. Indigenous/maroon peoples in this area have historically been regarded by their respective governments not only as backward, primitive, and impediments to development, but also as unreliable providers of raw materials, or even as destroyers of their own environment. This contrasts sharply with the way indigenous people have become associated with environmental themes in other countries in the region. Recently, however, indigenous and maroon populations in the Caribbean Amazon have started borrowing from environmental discourses used by indigenous people in other American nations to underpin their struggle for the recognition of their ancestral lands.

This paper is based on literature and archival materials, mainly from colonial sources, describing indigenous and maroon populations in Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. It evaluates how these groups have been portrayed in the national development narratives of these countries, and attempts to construct an environmental history out of the available materials, which were mainly written from a resource extraction perspective. Subsequently, based on interactions with representatives of the populations concerned, the paper identifies the origins of the new self-consciousness of indigenous and maroon populations as stewards of the rainforest. As a time period, it focuses on the period from the emergence of discussions on the assimilation of the “Amerindian” or the “Bush Negro” in policy discussions at the beginning of the 20th century, through the resource boom of the 1940s, to the independence and post-independence of both Guyana and Suriname, and the emergence of new environmental narratives.

The research is especially relevant given the current discussions surrounding indigenous, black and peasant groups, and their roles in the protection of tropical rainforest to counter carbon emissions.