

INDIGENOUS TOURISM IN THE AMAZON REGION OF SURINAME: ACTIONS TO PRESERVE AUTHENTICITY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Marianna CAPPUCCI*

University "G. D'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescara, Department of Economics,
Viale Pindaro 42, 65127, Pescara, Italy, e-mail: mariannacappucci@libero.it

Abstract: Indigenous tourism to the interior of Suriname started about 15 years ago and the sector is still growing. As an emergent tourism destination, the country is facing some complexities. The isolation that has protected Suriname's ecosystem, natural resources and indigenous cultures may come to an end, and actions to preserve these remarkable resources should soon be done; uncontrolled tourism can bring damage to both nature and culture. The paper focuses on indigenous themed tourism and explores the need and the opportunity for developing a destination, such as Suriname, to elaborate policies and procedures in order to promote sustainable tourism and to avoid commodification and falsification of indigenous culture, as it has occurred in some other countries.

Key words: Suriname, Indigenous tourism, Sustainable tourism, Maroons, Amerindians

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Theoretical background

Indigenous tourism refers to tourist activities in which indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction (Hinch & Butler, 1996, 9; Hinch, 2004, 246).

Smith (1996) describes indigenous tourism as a 'tourism which directly involves native people whose ethnicity is a tourist attraction' (p. 283). She uses a Four H scheme; habitat, heritage, history and handicraft¹. Habitat is the geographical setting, namely the fragile places inhabited by indigenous people. These places are popular to tourists because of the uniqueness and the harshness of the landscape in which indigenous people live. Through heritage ethnographic traditions are meant, such as the values of the local community, their long-standing skills and knowledge to survive. History refers to the effects of acculturation, specifically to post-contact relation between the westerns and indigenous people. Handicrafts are important for tourists to bring back home and an important way to earn money for the local people (Sinclair, 2003, 143; Brouns, 2011, 4).

Tourism is seen as a major source of potential economic growth and independence for indigenous peoples. This is exemplified in the greater focus given in academic

* Corresponding author

¹ The model is derived from the Four S concept (sun, sea, sand and sex) to describe the beach resort tourism

literature and in public policy to increasing the level of indigenous involvement in the tourism industry and the search for development options. Sometimes the rush to develop alternative forms of indigenous tourism results in dislocation of indigenous people (Piore, 2002; Sinclair, 2003) and can provoke the commodification of indigenous culture (Whithford et al., 2001). One of the keys for indigenous tourism seems to be the “Self-determination principle”. This means that indigenous people should “set the terms for visitation to their traditional territories, as well as other third party uses of their collective cultural property” (Johnston, 2000, 91; Hinch, 2004, 253). According to Sinclair “Indigenous sovereignty must take precedence over any other imperative that drives to tourism operations” (Sinclair, 2003, 145).

To find ways to achieve economic growth through tourism while minimizing the potential negative impacts of tourism on indigenous communities, significant discussion has been given, in particular, to the achievement of sustainable development (see for example, Sofield, 1991, 1993; Altman & Finlayson, 1993; Li, 2000; McIntosh et al., 2002) and to the creation of a Community-based tourism (Andereck et al., 2005; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009).

METHODOLOGY AND KEY POINTS

The idea of this paper comes from various trips in Suriname where the opportunity to collaborate with some researchers of the University “Anthon De Kom” arose. Then, the meeting with Monique Pool, chairman of the Foundation “Green Heritage Fund Suriname”, gave to the author the change to approach the indigenous themed tourism in the country and to collaborate at a tourism project into an indigenous village.

Fieldworks and tourist tours undertaken by the author in Amerindian and Maroon villages (in particular Kalabaskreek and Aurora) will supplement the knowledge already available from literature and the study object, as some aspects remain unknown if we stay behind the desk and observe the world and reality out of context (like museum objects) and never go into the field.

The results of this research will contribute to finding an answer to these questions:

- On what is based and how is managed the indigenous tourism in the interior of Suriname?
- What is the impact of tourism on indigenous communities?
- How can a community profit (more) from tourism projects?

To better answer to these questions, examples of tourism projects in indigenous villages will be presented. In particular the paper will focus on the small project in Kalabaskreek carried out by Green Heritage Fund Suriname.

As starting point it is important to define the term “indigenous people”. In general, people that have historical continuity with pre-invasion and precolonial societies are considered as “indigenous”. However for this discussion the term refers to pre-Columbians societies (Amerindians or Native Americans) as well as communities of Maroons, descendants of African slaves brought to Suriname from XVII to XIX centuries.

Indigenous tribes of Suriname: Maroons and Amerindians as tourism attraction

The country now called Suriname was invaded and settled by England in 1650, then traded to Holland in 1667 – for which England received Manhattan. Suriname developed into a prosperous colony producing sugar and later coffee, cacao, and cotton. Next to the English and Dutch planters, Sephardic Jews from Brazil and the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and to a lesser extent Spain) were active in plantation agriculture (Arends, 2002, 118). Slavery was introduced in the beginning of the sixteenth century only to be

abolished in 1863. Between 1668 and 1823, approximately 300,000 to 325,000 African slaves, mostly from West Africa, were brought to Suriname (St-Hilaire, 2000, 113). However, at the end of this period there were only 50,000 people of African descent in Suriname (Price, 1976). Part of these slaves, fought themselves free by escaping from the plantations and, after waging protracted guerrilla wars, they established independent African tribes in the bush interior. Today more than 80.000 Maroons (formerly called “Bush Negroes”) live in Suriname forming six main tribes, with the largest being the Saramaka and the Ndjuka². These groups have maintained a large degree of political, socioeconomic, and territorial sovereignty within the nation-state.

Every Maroon group, except for the Kwinti, has a paramount chief (granman) and formal government (St-Hilaire, 2000). A Maroon village is inhabited by around 100 to 200 people (Price & Price 1999, 19). The villages are situated in the rainforest along rivers, important centers for their daily life. Along rivers they fish, wash, cook, and spend most of their community life. The subsistence of the Maroons is based on what the tropical forest has to offer, hunting and fishing as well as shifting horticulture, which was learned from the Amerindians (Thoden van Velzen & Hoogbergen, 2011, 3). Mitrasing (1979) observed that the Maroons are still living in an African atmosphere and under archaic conditions, despite many years of missionary activities, support and enlightenment. Ritual life is important and makes up part of daily life in this society. Ancestors, forest spirits, deities, and snake gods are incorporated into daily life. Communication with these powers is done through consultations of oracles, spirit possession, and the interpretation of dreams (Price & Price, 1980, 18; 1999, 20). Men serve as priests, whereas women can only serve as mediums for spirits (Price, 2003, 31). This part of African culture has vanished even in Africa and represents, together with their unique and traditional lifestyle, a strong tourism attraction.

Before the coming of the Europeans, Suriname was inhabited by at least three Indigenous nations: the Carib, Arowak, and Wayana people (Desales Affigne, 1997). Today there are eight different ethnic groups of Native Americans living in different groups – the most populous are Arowak, Carib, Trio and Wayana – and speaking at least nine distinct Amerindian languages (Carlin & Goethem, 2099). They represent only 4% of the total population of Suriname³ and are divided into two different kind of tribes: those that inhabit lowland coastal areas, and the inhabitants of the interior or highland rainforest areas (O’Neill et al., 2006).

Lowland tribes have road access to towns and cities and tend to be more integrated into the multicultural framework of modern Suriname. Highland tribes (mostly Trio tribes) have been generally more isolated (and are still quite isolated from the social economic progress in the rest of Suriname). For instance their villages are reachable only by long, arduous overland journeys or by air. This is the main reason why the Highland tribes have maintained their cultural traditions intact into the present period, making it unique for Suriname and for the world.

Basso (1977) identifies some typical treats of these groups including very old shamanistic rituals (that involve curing), mirror-image or shadow conceptualization of the soul, and pan-village communal ceremonies that are secular and commemorative in nature. Indeed respect for nature is very important in their culture and they play an important role in maintaining the area’s natural wealth. Recently there is a great interest for their use of medical plants and, together with archeologists, linguists or historians, medical scientists and researchers are focusing on subjects like Amerindian material

² The other tribal populations of the maroon group are: Matawai, Paramaka, Kwinti. and Aluku (Boni)

³ According to the 2012 census, the total population is 534.189 (ABS 2013).

culture. Their knowledge on medical plants use and rituals, partly abandoned after a strong dissuasion of evangelical missionaries (O'Neill et al., 2006), must be retrieved and preserved as well as their cultural heritage. Also stakeholders operating in tourism sector have a great interest in Amerindian tribes and they are trying to develop and establish tourism activities deep in the Interior of Suriname.

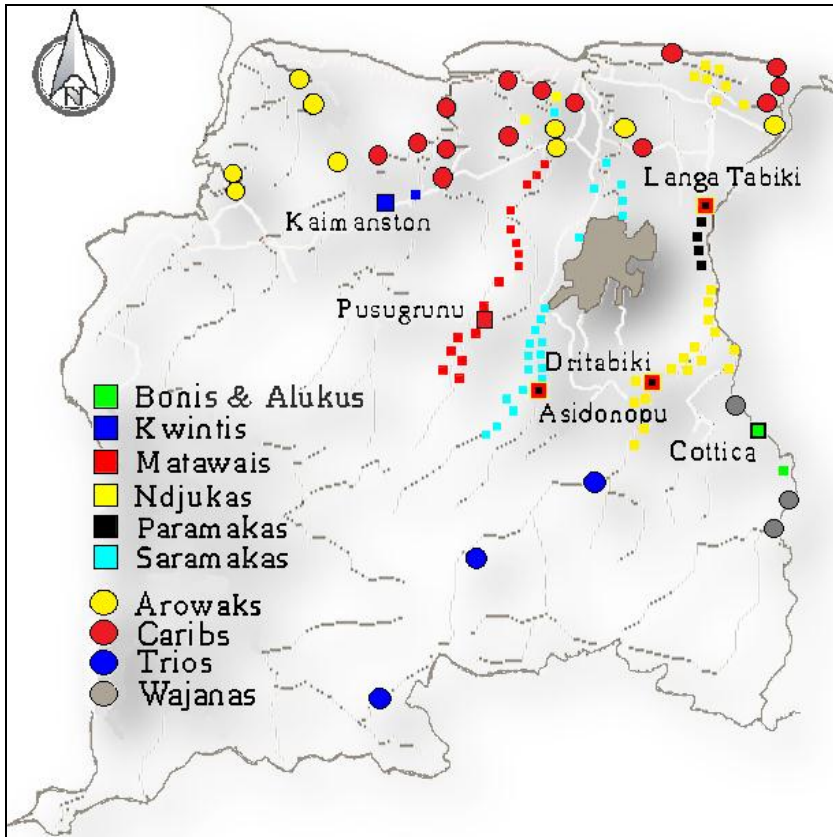


Figure 1: Sketch of indigenous villages in Suriname: □ Maroons ○ Amerindians
(Source: www.indigenouscaribbean.com, 2014)

Tourism in the interior: opportunities and challenges for indigenous communities

Destinations associated with the culture of indigenous people tend to be unique places, which can enrich the way tourists understand the world (Hinch, 2004, 246). Trying to escape urban life and landscapes, tourists are looking for the “other” and in many cases they are searching for the “primitive” as a way to develop an understanding of their own place in the world (Waite, 1999).

Suriname possesses what would be a key attraction to a growing segment of the tourism market. Indigenous tourism in the country is still in a stage of involvement and development. Tourists are interested in the unique culture of the Maroons and the Native Americans; they have their own language, a unique ancestral and traditional lifestyle, a distinctive cultural organization of the community (e.g. endogamy and polygamy), music, dances and religious rituals.

More in general, Suriname's natural assets (Amazon forest, nature tours, large biodiversity, etc.) provide a big potential for tourism development. The tourism sector is already of importance for the Surinamese economy (income, jobs), although the country is still mainly visited by Dutch tourists. The country is a former Dutch colony⁴ and an exotic location where the Dutch can speak their language and know more about the colonial period of their own motherland. However, Suriname is becoming popular to other tourists as well (Table 2); the Lonely Planet travel guide has made a list of the ten best destinations to visit in 2010, and Suriname is one of them⁵.

According to the Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek, the Surinamese Statistics Administration, the country recorded 249,102 arrivals in 2013 with an increase of 59% over five years⁶. Visitors from Holland represent about 50% of total arrivals per year and they visit Suriname mostly for family reasons; indeed, in 2012 Surinamese living in Holland were about 350,000, of which the 47% are of second generation (Statistics Netherlands Integration Report, 2012)⁷. This means that the diasporic tourism component in the country is large and it plays an important role in acting and promoting cultural heritage tourism. For new tourist destinations diaspora tourists may be important for many reasons: as "first movers" to open new opportunities in the international market, as sources of valuable word-of-mouth advertising, and as investors in tourism or export trade (Newland et al., 2010).

It can be mentioned also that, as Pérez-López (2007) suggests, diaspora tourism may result in the geographic expansion of tourism within the country; diaspora tourists reach less-visited sites than do other international tourists by traveling to see friends and relatives, participating in cultural and sporting events, and visiting secondary or regional sites. In the specific case of Suriname a lot of local people have never visited the Interior of their own country; the tours are expensive and they are mainly made by diaspora (and/or foreign) visitors.

Table 1: Arrivals by Nationalities (%)
(Source: Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek in Suriname⁸)

Total arrivals	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
The Netherlands	58.5	59.9	62.3	58.6	53.9	49.7	44.5
Rest of Europe	3.7	4.2	4.3	4.6	4.4	4.2	4.5
Brazil	3.6	4.6	4.6	5.0	5.2	5.4	6.5
Guyana	8.2	9.9	8.2	8.9	12.4	14.9	15.0
French Guyana	12.4	9.4	8.2	9.3	9.7	11.7	13.7
Rest of South America	0.6	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6
The Carabbean	5.9	5.1	5.9	5.9	7.0	6.6	6.6
North America	2.9	2.8	2.8	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.5
Rest of the World	3.9	3.3	2.9	3.5	2.9	3.2	3.9
Unknown	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.7	0.6	1.2

Usually the tours to the Upper Suriname are organized by tour operators situated in Paramaribo⁹ and not by the inhabitants of the area visited. These tours take only a few

⁴ Dutch Guyana (Suriname) achieved its independence from Holland in 1975 but, as a former colony of the Netherlands, the country still has cooperation with the Dutch.

⁵ <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel-tips-and-articles/15809>

⁶ in 2009 visitors in the country were 150,628.

⁷ <http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/CF430FF1-4623-4D60-B34B-CBE33749006A/0/2012b72pub.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.statistics-suriname.org/index.php/statistieken/database/147-aangekomen-en-vertrokken-personen>

⁹ The city, often called the Wooden City for its colonial architecture of wooden structures and unique designs, is on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites.

days and have to be made by bus and boat or by plane. The trips are often sold in package tours including drinks and food, accommodation, transport and activities. There are dozens of tour operators in Paramaribo; as tourism has a commercial nature it is not surprising that they have packaged the demand for indigenous culture and jungle experience into marketable products.

Very often the “eco”-resorts are not integrated in the villages and do not follow the traditional style; they result in dislocation with the community as tour operators create appropriate spaces for tourists. There is little space for contacts between visitors and local people and only few members of indigenous communities are employed in resorts (usually as dancers and local guides for tours in forests). As also Sinclair (2003) noticed, in Suriname tour operators have the not uncommon practice to take into indigenous communities boxed lunches purchased in the city that limits opportunity for the visitor to appreciate indigenous cuisine.

With such an external influence in managing the visits in the interior, the danger is that “the indigenous people are passive or even unwilling participants in tourism activities as they and their communities are presented as significant attractions in the tourism landscape by external stakeholders” (Hinch, 2004, 247). In addition, the commodification of indigenous culture may provoke the loss of authenticity and sustainability (Whitford et al., 2001; Hinch, 2004). Indeed the mechanisms by which tourism alters culture and identity are debated. Some authors have shown that tourism can lead to a renaissance of native culture by instilling new pride in local communities (Grunewald, 2002; Ingles, 2001; Van den Berghe & Keyes, 1984) or by encouraging creative forms of self-representation (Bendix, 1989; Cohen, 1979, 1988; Evans-Pritchard, 1989; Stronza, 2008). In the case of Suriname a fairly large number of people have recently moved away from the interior of the country in search of jobs and schooling. This migration is gradually corroding both Maroon and Amerindian distinctiveness. Tourism may be a tool to stop this trend as tourism offers jobs close to home and may preserve, in some way, the authenticity of these tribal societies.

The question is more about the economic involvement in tourism of indigenous communities. People in Paramaribo earn much more from tourism to the interior than people living there and often the tour operators do not manage the negative consequences on the local community and the environment. Indigenous community members need to be involved in tourism in order to profit economically from it. They should be also 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 (Sinclair, 2003, 145). For this purpose the communities need financial and technical assistance to train its members in tourism product development, marketing and operations and to procure essential materials and equipment necessary to promote a more sustainable form of tourism.

Surinamese government sees the tourism sector as an important tool for economic development and has serious plans for promoting sustainable tourism. In government policies regarding tourism the vulnerable environment and the unique indigenous cultures should be taken into account. In this respect, the semi-governmental organization, Stichting Toerisme Suriname (STS – Suriname Tourism Foundation), founded in 1996, aims to promote responsible tourism.

There is also an international interest in helping indigenous groups providing training and improving education needed to develop sustainable tourism in the interior. Most initiatives and projects in tourism are financed and implemented by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), especially through the Small Grants Programme Suriname.

In this regard, very successful is the IDB's support in ecotourism industry by promoting skills training for employment in the hospitality sector as well as a community based participation. Among others, the project in the small community of Kwamalasamutu is of great interest; the village is located very deep in the forest, in south western Suriname adjacent in the border areas of Brazil and Guyana . The community of Kwamalasamutu of 1,200 persons belongs to the Indian Trio people and it is physically isolated as the only transport connection with the outside is by small charter plane. As the economy was becoming subsistent, family members had started to work in Paramaribo or in the gold-mining in distant interior locations with the risk for the community to lose the integrity of its ancient indigenous culture and lifestyle. The IDB, together with Conservation International, helped the community to develop the first community-owned and community-managed lodge in Suriname where local people are involved in full respect of the precious nature and biodiversity of the rainforest around and where visitors can experience the authenticity of villagers' lifestyles (indeed they are put to sleep in hammocks under typical local thatched roof hut)¹⁰.

Sustainable Tourism Project in Kalebaskreek

Next to the governmental and international projects there are a lot of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Foundations involved in tourism. In her research Brouns (2011) found many groups active in Suriname: development organizations (e.g. PAS - Pater Ahlbrinck Stichting), environmental organizations (e.g. Nimos Nature Institute), community based organizations (e.g. "Wan duumi moo didia" for preservation of the local culture in Kosindo and stichting Kajana), women's organizations (present in most villages) and academic institutions (e.g. Anton de Kom University). They all have a concern for the environmental setting of indigenous communities. Among them there is Green Heritage Fund Suriname (GHFS).

The GHFS is a charitable foundation that was set up in Suriname in October 2005. The foundation was established to fund activities that help promote the green image and cultural heritage of Suriname. Its main activities are the "Xenarthra Programme" – involved in the shelter, care, rehabilitation and release of sloths, armadillos and anteaters¹¹ (orphaned and distressed animals are adopted temporarily) – the "Dolphin Programme" – aiming to educate people about dolphin conservation and the protection of the population of wild dolphins in Suriname – and the "Culture and Communities Programme". Under this last activity, in 2013 the GHFS carried out a short tourism project in the Amerindian village of Kalebaskreek.

For the 180 inhabitants of this village along the banks of Coppename river, tourism and in particular eco-tourism represents the promise of more substantial revenue than what is currently obtained primarily through fishing and logging. For several years the local women's organization "Kupa Katong" has been active to create a sustainable livelihood, while at the same they were trying to increase awareness about environmental aspects and the rich biodiversity of the region they inhabit, because the income from other economic activities is declining.

From 2010 Kupa Katong has been starting to develop sustainable tourism in Kalabaskreek by approaching the GHFS with the hope to learn how to better exploit the tourism potential of their community. Financed by Skafonds – a Dutch Foundation operating the Netherlands, the Caribbean part of the Kingdom and Suriname with the aim to create opportunities for people in vulnerable situations – the GHFS helped successfully

¹⁰ More information about this project are available at www.iadb.org and visible at <http://www.100procentzomer.nl/zomer/index.php/100-projects-mainmenu-37/7-100-projects/10-pro+ject-kwamalasamutu>

¹¹ Xenarthra is the order of animals that includes the sloths (2 species), armadillos (9 species) and anteaters (3 species).

the villagers to increase the tourism potential and to be independent in managing visits in their village. The project comprised of a training in tourism skills, including basic hospitality skills and cooking lessons (see figure 2).

The community members had already a lodge for tourists (figure 3) in their village but they needed to know how to manage it and what kind of activities to propose at their guests. GHFS identified the community as a good location for activities that should ultimately lead to sustainable tourism from which the indigenous community of Kalebaskreek would benefit, including activities such as spotting and watching dolphins, giant river otters, manatees and birds. Most of all, the volunteers of GHFS helped local people to realize that their culture has a very big value for tourists.



Figure 2. Cooking lesson in Kalebaskreek during the tourism training, year 2013
(Source: GHFS)



Figure 3. Traditional houses in Kalebaskreek
(Source: Kalebaskreek's facebook page)

As the culture of the village is becoming diluted, the local language is hardly spoken and the young people seem not be interested to learn local traditions; they had to be encouraged to valorize their dances and ancestral music and songs. There was also the need to revitalize the traditional handicrafts (figure 4) and to give assistance in order to raise the sale of products (for example to display them in a more attractive way for tourists by putting up nice looking shops and small markets).



Figure 4. Local handicraft stand
(Source: Kalebaskreek's facebook page)

At the end of the training a group of tourists was received for a tour that offered to the villagers the opportunity to receive feedbacks from the visitors. Through a questionnaire submitted by volunteers of GHFS, the local members of Kalebaskreek were able to know strengths and weaknesses of the tourism experience they propose, and to further improve hospitality, tourist facilities and activities. Today the community-based tourism in Kalebaskreek is able to receive independently tourists in a very eco-sustainable way, and to advertise the village without intermediaries (the community has its own facebook page or websites)¹².

Of course there are still some aspects to improve. What is often lacking in indigenous villages like Kalebaskreek is the knowledge of languages to communicate with international tourists as people still speak native languages or Dutch; more education is needed to learn English and in some cases to improve Dutch. Skanfonds is already preparing a longer project to further develop tourism and get it going.

Final remarks

Developing indigenous tourism in Suriname has several advantages. Since the economy in the interior is poor, tourism activities can be a tool for the local communities to profit economically by creating employment in that particular area. Currently the tours in the Amazon villages are packed by tour operators in Paramaribo with a very little space for the involvement of local people. Indigenous communities are often presented as a tourism attraction and this is provoking commodification and dilution of their cultures. The unique indigenous cultures of Maroons and Amerindians need to be preserved by minimizing the external influence and by considering the local sovereignty as an imperative. The creation of a community-based tourism should be a key for the indigenous tourism development.

However, in order for the communities to be involved in and profit from tourism more education and knowledge is needed. A lot of actors are involved, there are different options to raise the benefits of tourism and reduce the negative impact on local communities. International organizations, NGOs and government are aware that tourism training for local people must be guaranteed. In this respect they are carrying out some successful sustainable tourism projects in indigenous villages but much more work remains to be done. Following their arguments the future of indigenous tourism in Suriname, as well as in other countries, will highly depend on whether it will develop in the direction of a socially and environmentally responsible branch of the economy. In particular, in order to develop and promote sustainable tourism, all relevant stakeholders in Suriname have to: 1) support the integrity of the place; 2) conserve resources; 3) respect local culture and traditions. As tourism in the interior of Suriname is in a beginning stage some risks and problems, happened in some other indigenous communities all around the world, can still be prevented. For this purpose the study of indigenous people and tourism in Suriname need to be further investigated. Future research would also benefit from interviews with relevant stakeholders in Suriname.

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¹² For more details visit: <http://rootsjourneys.blogspot.it/p/the-women-of-kalebaskreek.html>

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