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GUYANA

SUCCESS STORY

The Birding Tourism Program Soars

Thanks to the efforts of the USAID Birding Tourism Program, the once-overlooked South American country of Guyana is quickly becoming recognized as an eco-tourism hotspot for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts from around the globe. The birding program targets international tour operators, birdwatchers and the media, while focusing on assisting the local tourism suppliers.



In February 2007, *Birdwatch* – one of the premier birdwatching magazines – ran an article on Guyana that said, “with such a wealth of birds, combined with an unrivaled spirit of both adventure and hospitality, it seems very soon that Guyana is destined...to become well and truly established as a first-class birding destination.”

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CHALLENGE With a low population density, millions of acres of pristine rainforest, a range of ecosystems and an incredible number of flora and fauna species (225 of mammals, 880 of reptiles and amphibians, 6500 of plants and more than 815 species of birds) Guyana has all the necessary components of a great eco-tourism destination. But a lack of international recognition and limited tourism infrastructure contribute to the fact that the country only sees a mere 2,000 tourists per year. This low number isn't enough to allow tourism to become a sustainable and feasible aspect of Guyana's economy.

INITIATIVE Recognizing the economic impact that tourism can have in Guyana (especially within hinterland Amerindian communities), in 2006 USAID partnered with the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA), tour operator Wilderness Explorers, the Guyana Amazon Tropical Birds Society and local tourism suppliers to launch the Birding Tourism Program. The program is a market-led approach to develop Guyana's birding tourism sector and increase overall tourism arrivals and revenue for the country. It targets international tour operators, birdwatchers and media, while assisting local tourism suppliers.

Birdwatchers were identified as an ideal niche tourism market for Guyana because they're generally well educated and have the time, money and willingness to travel to off-the-beaten-path destinations. Birdwatching also contributes to conservation by focusing on sustainable activities and small groups of people focused on nature and preservation. Birding tourism in Guyana can also encourage local communities to conserve and protect their natural heritage, and provide alternate employment options to more damaging jobs like logging, mining and the illegal wildlife trade.

Marketing initiatives have included the development of trade show banners, birding itineraries, a media kit, a comprehensive website (www.guyanabirding.com), e-newsletters, more than 25 press releases, and funding for an updated version of *A Field Checklist of the Birds of Guyana*, which had been out of print since 2002.

To bring Guyana to the attention of the birdwatching market, the program has attended several trade shows including the American Birding Association convention and the British Birdwatching Fair, which is the world's largest.

The birding program has also organized four birding product familiarization tours to give tour operators and media professionals an opportunity to experience Guyana's birds and tourism products firsthand.

RESULTS The birding initiative has been successful in all aspects of the program. As a result of the familiarization trips, more than 30 international tour operators are currently selling, designing and bringing birdwatching trips to Guyana. One of the first companies to bring a birdwatching tour to Guyana as a result of the program's efforts was Eagle Eye Tours of Canada. Reporting the trip as a success, co-owner and tour guide, Richard Knapton said, “There is a darn good chance of Guyana becoming a hot Neotropical birdwatching destination.”

Relationships and key partnerships have also been established with leading birding, conservation, tourism, donor and NGO organizations around the world. The assistance has resulted in guide training and donations of necessary birding equipment such as binoculars, scopes and field guides.

The program has also made good progress in attracting valuable media and PR for Guyana in international publications such as *Condé Nast Traveller*, which has a readership of more than 335,000.

In the winter 2007 issue of *Birds Illustrated* author Neil Glenn summed up his trip to Guyana by saying, “[Guyana] is the new last frontier; this is a rare chance to experience true wilderness. Visit soon and see how alive it makes you feel.”