GRIF Funded Eco-tourism Project Boosting Rewa’s Community Development

The Amerindian Development Fund (ADF) is being implemented through the Ministry of Indigenous People’s Affairs with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Finance is provided by the Kingdom of Norway through the Guyana Redd+ Investment Fund (GRIF).

The project provides GYD $5,000,000 to indigenous communities to start a community business venture that will offer a service, create employment and invest the profits into other sectors that will benefit the entire community.

Rewa village has invested GYD $5,000,000 in its Community Development Eco-tourism project as a means of expanding operations to better cater to the needs of its clients and boost its village economy.

Rewa is located approximately 50 miles up the Rupununi river, an hour and a half boat ride just off the Kwatamang Landing in North Rupununi, Region 9. A small village with a population of 309 with 59 households, it is home to predominantly Macushi indigenous peoples who are heavily dependent on the environment as their means of sustenance and livelihoods.

Imagine the breathtaking view of gigantic mountains; thick forests; caiman spotting, Arapaimas (the largest fresh water fish in the world), various species of birds in different sizes and colours (it’s like a bird sanctuary undiscovered), monkeys chattering, howling baboons and fresh clean air. The Rewa Eco-lodge is definitely a place to experience biodiversity and ecosystems conservation at its best!

The community is equipped with basic infrastructure and facilities such as a church, health post, Nursery and Primary schools, a playground, dug-out wells for water supply and solar power; Rewa has also found a way to boost its village economy through the establishment of its Eco-Lodge in 2002 with funding from other donors.
In an interview with the Chairman of the Community Development Project Management Team (CMT), Mr. Winston Edwards, it was explained that given the high demand for more accommodation from tourists especially during the peak period and the income generating potential, a unanimous decision was taken at a community meeting to use the funding from the ADF for expansion. As a result, three modernized eco-friendly cabins were added in 2016/2017.

Mr. Edwards added that the CMT considered the recommendations of the tourists by designing the new cabins with a straight floor between the sleeping area and bathroom. These are on high demand. He calls them “the preferred cabins.” This expansion is already reaping fruits and booming with 126 visitors occupying those cabins up to April 2018.

He said the success of this community development project is not without the commitment, labor and consistent support of the residents who volunteered when needed to ensure the project was on schedule. The women were particularly commended for their efforts in carrying materials and clearing the land during the construction phase. The wood and thatching materials were sourced within the community.

Rewa’s CMT received training in financial and project management, book-keeping, monitoring and reporting in the start-up phases with continuous technical support from the ADF Project Management Unit and UNDP.

Located in a far-flung hinterland area, there are hardly any opportunities for employment and therefore residents rely on hunting, farming and fishing as a means of generating income. As such, with the high unemployment rate in the community, the Eco-lodge was able to provide direct employment to 36 persons on a full- or part-time basis.

Some positions such as boat captains, cooks, tour guides, security guards, gardener and housekeeping are on a rotational basis to ensure everyone is benefiting in one way or another and to provide for their families.

Fruits, vegetables and other farm produce are purchased from residents for the operations of the Eco-Lodge thereby allowing those persons to benefit indirectly and have a source of income.
One would wonder, how is Rewa making it happen? By securing great partnerships both locally and internationally and practicing good marketing strategies the community was able to make progress. Residents alluded to the fact that the startup was a challenge but they were able to overcome bit by bit. It was explained that poor weather delayed the construction process in many instances but they were able to double their efforts through volunteerism during good weather. Sometimes funds did not reach the community on time but in an effort to keep the project going, they used finances from the village account which was replaced when funds arrived.

Attracting tourists started by “word of mouth.” From just accommodating two (2) clients, there was a quick jump to eighteen (18) and the numbers continued to increase. The use of brochures, flyers, video documentaries and the internet to create a website and social media pages also helped with clients.

Through continuous networking and discussions, Rewa entered into agreements with local and international Tour Operators. They started by offering them familiarization tours at a reduced rate and the Tour Operators in return marketed the Eco-Lodge.

These efforts have attracted many local and overseas visitors from the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia, Canada, Japan, Germany and others. Visitors included Government Ministers, Technical Officers, Students, Researchers, Environmentalists, NGOs, Regional Officials, Medical teams, birding groups, nature lovers and sport fishing fanatics.

Currently, the Rewa Eco-Lodge has 6 cabins, 2 benabs, a large dining area and an administrative office. Rewa is a good example of how commitment, good management, teamwork and professionalism can make an idea blossom. The CMT emphasizes the importance of training and as such all boat captains and cooks were trained and licensed in their respective fields. Training was also provided in First Aid.

Rewa Eco-Lodge has utilized funds generated by the business to repair the three cabins that were initially constructed and has so far invested in the development of its community by contributing to the construction of a Church building.

As part of the future plans for the community, profits generated from the Eco-Lodge operations will see the establishment of a village shop to cater to basic needs of the residents.

In addition, Rewa Eco-Lodge hopes to dig a sizable and adequate well and expand the trestle to ensure residents have access to better water facilities. They are also considering establishing a funding mechanism
to provide transportation for school children thereby ensuring students attend school and receive a quality education.

They will also work with the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) to have the business legally registered and all necessary documents obtained. The Lodge will continue to expand its marketing efforts to attract more tourists - "More visitors mean more employment."

Co-manager, Mr. Levi Edwards said he is extremely satisfied with the services being offered. He explained that a review of the guest book is evidence of how satisfied visitors are with the services, which in turn provides motivation to both the staff and community.

The success of Rewa's business venture is contributing to Sustainable Development Goals 1 – No Poverty; 2 - Zero Hunger; 5 – Gender Equality; and 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Below are testimonials from staff at Rewa Eco-Lodge on how this business venture changed their lives.

Levi Edwards is 55 years old and is the Co-Manager and Boat Captain (part time) at Rewa Eco-Lodge since September 2017. He has 8 children and 13 grandchildren. Prior to his employment at the Lodge, Mr Edwards was a Community Health Worker for 22 years and also worked as a farmer.

He said his employment at the Eco-lodge is helping him to provide for his family and he is proud the village is benefitting directly and indirectly.

Vionne Edwards is the first female to volunteer her services during the construction of the cabins. She assisted by fetching material. Currently she sells produce from her farm (fruits and vegetables) to the Eco-Lodge.

Ms. Edwards said that her community can develop through tourism and the employment potential of the business in the long term.

Claris Jose is 36 years old and the Accountant at Rewa since 2013. She works on a rotational basis (6 months per year).

She has 6 children and worked as a farmer prior to gaining employment at the Eco-Lodge.

Claris volunteered her services during the project start-up by fetching materials and clearing the site.

She feels good about the community project as it provides employment especially for women and she can cater for her family. Claris said her computer skills were poor but she received on the job training and is better able to function now.
Peggy Xavier is the Head Cook at Rewa Eco-Lodge since 2005. She is the first person to receive training in catering and hospitality through the Lodge.

Peggy said the project is good because she gained employment. Since she did not attend high school, she was uncertain about her future and gaining employment but through the project and establishment of the Eco-Lodge that changed.

She explained that the project is benefitting everyone in Rewa and generating income.

Rovin Alvin considers himself an “all-rounder.” He provides many different services to the Eco-Lodge. These include boat captain, tour guide, carpentry and sport fishing.

Prior to his employment at Rewa, Rovin worked outside the village as there was no employment in the area. However, in 2015 he was selected to participate in a birding training by the GTA at Karanambu Lodge. He subsequently returned and began working at the Eco-Lodge.

He explained that he only has a primary education and his employment at the Lodge helped him to improve his public speaking, knowledge sharing and marketing skills.

Mildred Ignacio is the Reservations Clerk at Rewa Eco-Lodge. She is 23 years old and a mother of one child.

Mildred has been working at the Eco-Lodge since October 2012 just after leaving school. She said during her days at school the management of the Eco-Lodge really assisted her and she always wanted to offer her services back.

Personally, she has developed her computer skills on the job and is happy that a business owned by the community is providing employment for residents so that they can provide for their families.