



# on a road less traveled



At first glance, a small village in the South American country of Guyana bears little resemblance to our own neighborhoods. Eighty percent of the country is covered in lush rain forest, much of it nearly impossible to navigate and highly valued for its range of iconic animal and plant species. Only one main road runs through Guyana, connecting many of the south-central villages and communities in the forests to the larger cities and settlements on the coast.

But just as our conservation efforts can begin right in our own backyards, the people of Guyana have taken determined steps toward using the potential of their wisdom to guide conservation initiatives. Their actions offer a unique learning opportunity.

Last August, 18 students from across the United States embarked on a unique journey as the debut class of Miami University's "Guyana: Local Wisdom and Conservation" course, for which Chicago Zoological Society staff serve as instructors and coordinators.

The course is part of a master's degree program designed to introduce students to environmental stewardship, inquiry-driven education, and a broad understanding that effects change locally and globally. The focus of the program is on field experiences and relationships with international communities that develop sustainable strategies. What is stressed is the principle that science is not just facts and information but rather a process strengthened by the bonds individuals build through direct engagement.

The Society's director of educational and international training, Dr. Ricardo Stanoss, accompanied the class as one of its instructors. In the past, Stanoss has worked with multiple organizations that spent years building the important relationships and connections that made the course a reality.



Students in Miami University's "Guyana: Local Wisdom and Conservation" course—along with Dr. Ricardo Stanoss, the Chicago Zoological Society's director of education and international training (in green hat at bottom)—interacted with the Makushi to learn their environmentally sustainable ways of life in the rain forest.

The class's first stop was the Iwokrama Forest, managed by the Iwokrama International Centre. This forest—where Amazonian and Guianan wilderness meet—is nearly a million square acres in size and home to an extraordinary population of jaguars, birds, bats, fish, monkeys, and countless other tropical species.

In the Iwokrama Forest, the students participated in experiments that measure the effects of sustainable-use practices in the region, such as camera monitoring of jaguars and careful observations along river and trail transects.

Following their three-day stay in Iwokrama, the class traveled to the Surama community to learn the Makushi people's way of life and thus their approach to conservation. The students built life-changing relationships as they participated in storytelling, cultural exchanges, and other daily practices in Surama. Throughout their visit, they learned while working alongside community members. Makushi leaders explained real-life examples and sustainable-use practices for ecotourism, farming, hunting, fishing, and other areas of expertise.

Following the success of this debut session, the Chicago Zoological Society is looking forward to a continuing partnership with its friends in Guyana as it helps build a global network of conservation leaders and role models there and elsewhere around the world. 🦋

