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Karanambu Trust



PROVIDING A HAVEN FOR GIANT OTTERS

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Their curious nature, ravenous appetite, affinity for humans, and size are probably the reasons why giant otters known as 'water dogs' are among the most likeable creatures in Guyana. Guyana's Giant Otters were first documented at the Karanambu Ranch in the North Rupununi in 1988. A stable population has been present in the area since then, and has been chronicled through the Giant Otter rehabilitation work of Diane McTurk, Executive Director of Karanambu Trust.

Presently the greatest threat to these otters is from loss of habitat and poisoning due to polluted waterways. Mercury, which is used in the gold mining industry, presents a danger for otters because they bioaccumulate mercury in their bodies. Deforestation and agriculture also lead to increased silting of creeks and rivers, which in turn leads to changes in the population of their primary food source. Giant Otters are very sensitive to other human activities as well. Motor engines and river camps can lead to otters moving to more remote areas.

Due to the dangers faced by the otters, the Karanambu Trust, a private charity, was established by the McTurk family in 1997.

Its mission is to ensure the sustainable use of the Karanambu Wetlands through wild life and habitat conservation, research, and education in partnership with local communities.

Karanambu Lodge and Trust

According to Macusi legend, the unusual formation of ironstone rocks at Karanambu landing stage are a potent warning of what can happen if you ignore the prophecies of the local 'paiman' or witchdoctor. The legend tells of the men of Karanambu who attended a celebratory dancing and drinking session in another village in defiance of his warning, and on their return they became these distinctive stones, and the village where the celebrations were held sank into the forest and became a pond.

Tiny McTurk, Diane's father, chose this spot on a wide bend in the Rupununi River to build a house and a depot for his balata business in 1927 because of its proximity to the river; the bend in the river and its adjacent sandbank provided a natural deep water bay, allowing access for boats even in the dry season. Survival in the early days at Karanambu required much skill in hunting.

McTurk hunted and fished in the traditional Amerindian way, and was very knowledgeable about wildlife. Diane has since taken over the ranch and established it into Karanambu Trust Inc with the objective of conserving and protecting unique and diverse habitat of the Karanambu Rupununi Wetlands.

Karanambu is now the home of Diane, conservationist and world-renowned expert on giant otters. Karanambu encompasses 125-square miles of savannah, marshy ponds, riparian forest, and a 40-mile stretch of the Rupununi River. Visitors to the lodge enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the wetlands, as well as Diane's warm hospitality.

The experience is also a true nature adventure: wildlife watching, fishing, walking and close encounters with orphaned

Giant Otters.

Diane McTurk

Diane McTurk was born at Karanambu soon after her pioneer father Tiny McTurk, established a cattle ranch there. Tiny was also a naturalist, and Diane learned to appreciate the region's extraordinary flora and fauna at an early age. After attending the Wychwood School in Oxford, England, she moved to London to work in the hospitality business for the Savoy Group.

In 1966, Diane returned to Guyana to celebrate the country's independence. She subsequently became the Press Officer for The Guyana Sugar Producers Association. She moved back to England briefly, and worked in corporate public relations before returning to her Rupununi roots in 1976.

Like all the cattle ranches in the area at the time, Karanambu had suffered from a series of misfortunes: epidemics of diseases had decimated the herds, and there were difficulties protecting the cattle from rustlers. As a result, Diane looked for alternatives to make a living. Karanambu was well known for its wildlife and spectacular fishing, and had always been a welcome rest stop for unexpected visitors. So, in 1983, she opened her home to eco-tourists. Diane also offered refuge to injured or orphaned wildlife. Sadly, the animal that appeared most often was one of the most endangered: the Giant Otter.

By necessity, Diane became a world expert on the care and rehabilitation of this species. She has so far raised over 40 orphaned otter cubs, returning most of them to the wild for a chance at freedom. In 1997, Diane, with the support of the McTurk family, established the Karanambu Trust as a private charity.

Action Plan 2010

Dawn McTurk, in an interview with Guyana Times Sunday Magazine, Diane's sister-in-law and conservation of otters activist, stated that recently the Trust has been working on an "action plan" to ensure the sustainable use of these wetlands through wildlife and habitat conservation, research, and education in partnership with local communities.

The top priority of the Trustees is to ensure Karanambu continues to be managed with minimal disruption to the flora and fauna, the river system and riparian flood forest, ponds, swamps, and the savannah.

Achieving this, members of the Trust are participating in the ongoing efforts to conserve the North Rupununi ecosystem in partnership with local communities, as well as with the Government of Guyana, primarily through the new Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS).

Trustee/ Chairman Joe Singh and Trustee Sydney Allicock, both members of the Multi Stakeholder Steering Committee of the Guyana government's LCDS, will lead this effort.

As needed, the Trust will continue to support the rehabilitation of orphaned giant otters and other orphaned wildlife under the guidance of Executive Director Diane McTurk and Trustee/ Secretary Dr Lucy Spelman.

Though Karanambu is well known for its biodiversity, its specific flora and fauna have not been studied. Sadly, development along the Rupununi River poses a threat to the health of this stunningly beautiful eco system.

The Trust's top research priority is to determine the biological qualities of the Karanambu Wetlands. Only then can changes over time be studied, and strategies developed to conserve and manage the area for all who live there.

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White Lotus Flower at Karanambu

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