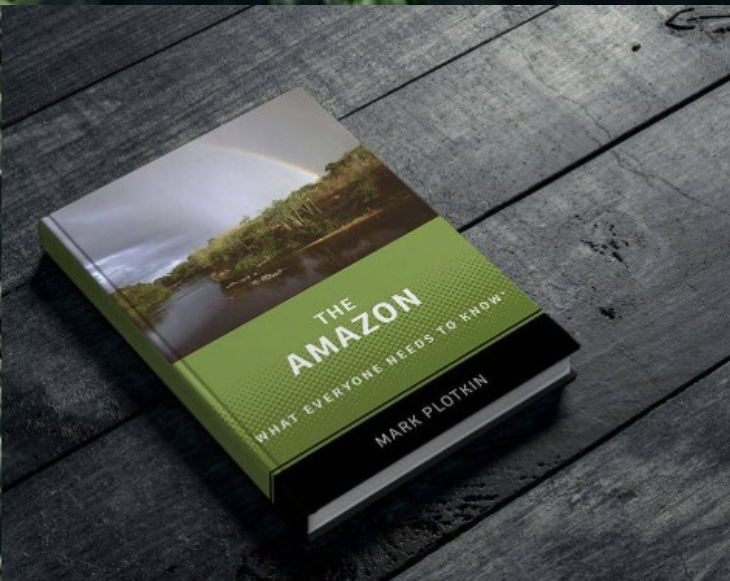


The future of the rainforest

Q&A with Mark Plotkin, Co-Founder and President of ACT, Ethnobotanist



Mark Plotkin, a world-renowned ethnobotanist and co-founder of the Amazon Conservation team, has been working in the Amazon for decades. With his new book out (aptly called 'Amazon'), we sat down with Mark and asked him about the forest and the ACT programme, supported by DOB Ecology. 'The forest as a source of healing power and Amazonian indigenous communities taking control of their destiny.' -- when Mark Plotkin thinks ahead, these are some of the outcomes he aims for with the programme. 'The indigenous peoples are typically the best stewards of their rainforests.'



< Mark Plotkin and Trio shaman Yaloefuh in 2020.

Q

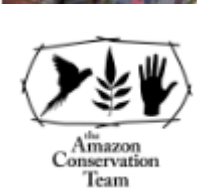
Mark, fast forward to 2050. Picture a village in the South of Surinam (North Eastern Amazon). How are the people and their forest doing?

A

'My hopes for all Amazonian villages of indigenous peoples are that they have control of their land, both legally and physically. The legal aspects have been particularly challenging in Suriname and some of the progress of the DOB Ecology project has helped move the land titling process forward.

'Some of our goals have been to help our indigenous colleagues set and attain realistic goals for their own ecological, cultural, educational and physical well-being. The best image that sums this all up was sent to me recently: it shows the shamans seated behind a desk in the Shaman's Apprentice clinic, handing out cups of an immunostimulant brew to all villagers, patiently standing in line, all wearing facemasks. In my view, this image tells so much: that the Indians know the outside world is pressing in, that they are using foreign technology (facemasks) as well as traditional knowledge (their own plants and ethnobotanical wisdom) to deal with it, that they are taking control of their destiny without waiting for the government or the church or conservation organizations to counsel them, and that they are valuing the forest as a source of healing power.

'The future will undoubtedly see more modernization but will also see that the indigenous communities have made conscious and informed decisions about which aspects of their traditional lives must be maintained. They will speak their traditional language while also improving their spoken and written Dutch. They will build on current ethno-education programs that integrate western knowledge (mathematics, computers) with traditional wisdom (songs, legends, medicinal plant knowledge) in both languages. They will protect large swaths of their traditional forest, understanding that it is a vital source of food, medicines and other non-timber products, both for their own use—fibers, in particular—and for generating income, notably through handicrafts. They will have built on current sustainable income generating programs, including honey, chile, and herbal teas, and created successful ecotourism programs which they themselves run.'



Programme

The Last of the Wild Places.

Goals

Partnering with the indigenous peoples to protect the rainforest and the traditional culture in the Northeast Amazon -- including progress on land rights, land use planning, governance and related fieldwork programs with the Trios, Wayanas and Wai-wais.

Partner

The Amazon Conservation Team (ACT).



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ACT's Johan Hardjopawiro (front right) providing GIS training to Matawai rangers, southern Suriname

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Indigenous women processing tea leaves for commercial use, Kwamalasamutu, Suriname



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Everything you need to know about the Amazon rainforest: an interview with Mark Plotkin

by Rhett A. Butler on 5 May 2020



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Stingless honeybees, Kwamalasamutu, Suriname





The threats undermining and devastating the culture and the forest are enormous. How on earth can a small community, a NGO or a philanthropic fund from the Netherlands make a difference or a lasting impact against those enormous odds?



'In my opinion, the failure of sustainable development efforts with forest peoples in Amazonia – time and time again – is the mistaken belief that funding is the panacea. Money is part of the equation – but just a part. As important are long term relationships based on trust, friendship, patience and even love. They allow one to best determine who are the best leaders, not only today but going forward to the future. And the best training – once again – needs to be based on these same long-term relationships, rather than just jetting in, doing a quick workshop, and jetting out. When indigenous peoples know that there are pananakiris (outsiders) who are there for the duration and not just blowing in and out while demanding tangible results on an all-too-quick western timeline, they can relax, trust and really learn – and teach.

'Asking what one foundation can do is in a sense no different from asking what one village can do in the middle of a huge forest in a world beset by greed, poverty, warfare, racism, climate change, Covid 19, etc. In both cases you have to start somewhere. So here are some answers:

- One mapping project with one tribe in one village (Kwamala) ended up launching an effort which has already resulted in 55 tribes mapping their rainforests, resulting in better management and protection of 80 million (!) acres of ancestral rainforests;
- One indigenous park ranger program started in one village twelve years ago has spread to five other villages and has become the longest running and best trained force in Amazonia;
- One Shamans' Apprentice Clinic started in one village has spread to three other villages which has in turn become the most successful medical plant wisdom cultural transmission program in Amazonia;
- One ethno-education program in one village – which focused on developing educational materials focusing on rainforest plants and animals in both Trio and Dutch - has proved so popular that the urban schools in Paramaribo are now also using them!

'The point here is that they establish both precedents and templates. Precedents are most important in demonstrating that indigenous peoples are typically the best stewards of their rainforests and – with some equipment and additional training – they can do so even more effectively. Creating a template is essential for a similar reason: it shows what can be done, and how we did it. We have received so many inquiries about the success of our ethnocartography for example that we created a handbook so that other tribal groups from around the world could learn from it and even improve upon it. Without smart and determined philanthropists like DOB Ecology to facilitate and catalyze turning good ideas into working models in remote corners of the world, these types of precedents and templates will never be realized. The interest and willingness to do so is what makes system change possible.

Q

What does Surinam mean to you, on a personal level?

A

'My most indelible image of Suriname – and why it holds such a special place in my heart – is not just those fabulous rainforests nor any of the great shamans with whom I have had the honor and pleasure to work. The image comes from an experience I had, walking in downtown Paramaribo. To my left was the SIV mosque, right next door to the Neveh Shalom Synagogue – nowhere else in the world I have seen a mosque and a synagogue as fond neighbors. The Muslims allow the Jews to use their parking lot on the High Holidays, and the Jews reciprocate for Islamic days of worship.

As I walked past these two buildings, two gentlemen were coming the other way: one a very black Afro-Surinamer, the other of Chinese ancestry – both laughing uproariously as they told each other jokes in Dutch. This tableau had it all in terms of faiths living in harmony – one fellow whose ancestors came from Africa greatly enjoying the company of his friend whose ancestors came from Asia while speaking a language that came from Europe while walked along the northeast edge of the Amazon! In short, this very Surinamese vision of people getting along while not plundering nature for everything she is worth to me is a model for everyone, everywhere.'