



The USAID-funded Guyana Sustainable Tourism Initiative Introduces New Approach to Tourism Development in Guyana

GEORGETOWN, GUYANA – In 2006, the Guyana Sustainable Tourism Initiative (GSTI), a joint program of the USAID-Guyana Trade and Investment Support (GTIS) project and the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA), brought a new approach to tourism development in Guyana.

After identifying birdwatching as a niche tourism market with significant potential for Guyana, the GSTI began a market-led approach to developing the industry. To generate market demand, the GSTI supported Guyana's attendance at leading tourism industry trade shows and conferences while concurrently launching an aggressive marketing and media campaign.

The GSTI developed a wide range of marketing materials (including two websites: www.guyanabirding.com and www.guyana.travel) that are used to promote Guyana to both travel professionals and potential visitors. While attending trade shows such as the British Birdwatching Fair, Adventure Travel World Summit, and the Educational Travel Conference, Guyana representatives used the marketing materials to introduce Guyana to the international tourism market. Trade show attendance also provided the ideal platform for meeting important international tour operators and travel media to invite on familiarization (FAM) trips.

By sponsoring and organizing nine FAM trips, the GSTI has introduced nearly 100 leading international tour operators and media representatives to Guyana's tourism products. Based on feedback from the participants, the project worked with local tourism providers to develop a product that meets international standards. These efforts, combined with Guyana's natural beauty and the prevalence of top bird and wildlife species, convinced the tour operators to return with clients and the media to write favorable stories.

Many FAM trip participants also encouraged Guyana's tourism industry to develop beyond birdwatching. After the birding tourism initiative became successful and groups began visiting Guyana, the GSTI worked with the industry to begin expanding focus into other tourism segments, including community-based tourism, catch-and-release sport fishing, and educational tourism.

Throughout, the media campaign continued to work with both niche and mainstream publications to help raise Guyana's profile as a nature and cultural tourism destination. Positive travel stories have been published in dozens of online, print and broadcast media outlets, including the New York Times, Wanderlust Magazine, Birdwatch Magazine, Birding Adventures TV, Condé Nast Traveller, BBC TV, MSN Travel, and National Public Radio.

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When compared to equivalent advertising costs, the value of the media coverage generated by the GSTI is more than US\$10 million. But more important is the value the stories and shows hold within the tourism industry. Media coverage generates interest from potential travelers, which translates into market demand and a reason for tour operators around the globe to promote and sell a destination.

Since 2006, Guyana has seen a marked increase in visitors and economic growth within the tourism industry. At the project's inception in 2006, the average occupancy rates for lodges in Guyana's interior were around 20 percent, and there were roughly 20 international tour operators booking Guyana trips. Presently there are more than 50 international tour operators selling Guyana trips and interior occupancy rates have jumped to 70 percent.

The GSTI and its partners have worked to enhance Guyana's tourism products through local infrastructure improvement and training programs on issues such as birding tourism, ecotourism good practices, indigenous and community tourism development, and marketing. GSTI has also assisted Guyana's birding, nature and fishing guides to obtain professional training, skills development and equipment ranging from binoculars to first aid kits.

The sustainable tourism industry that the GSTI has helped to develop also plays an important role in Guyana's conservation efforts. Tourism as it is being developed in Guyana is bringing small groups of nature- and conservation-focused people to unique, undeveloped places. Their business encourages local communities to conserve and protect their natural heritage and environment while providing alternate employment options to more environmentally damaging jobs in areas such as logging, mining and the wildlife trade. Tourism is speaking for conservation in Guyana by giving a voice to the rainforest's biodiversity, cultures, indigenous inhabitants, and ecosystem services.

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