

Guyana “Planet Zoo” Television Production Expedition

May 14 - 23, 2001

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with Bryan Smith, Producer bps@telusplanet.net ; Brian Elliott, Cameraman, storyboard@home.com ; Larry
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Karanambo: Diane McTurk, Karanambo owner; Kenneth Manduke, boatman and guide; Bunting (David) Melville, Lodge Manager; Alvin Benjamin (fisherman for the otters); Ryol & Ramlall, the successful otter finders; Elizabeth Melville, Buntings wife and head of kitchen; Elizabeth, head cook; Renda Moses, kitchen server; Ashley Holland, past guide.

May 14: Dee dropped me off at the airport at 11:00 P.M. to meet up with the rest of the crew as planned. Donna Sheppard was there too, as by coincidence, her flight coincided with our departure. After a bit of fussing with the oversized package containing the new “old” donated Calgary Zoo computer for the Georgetown Zoo and the overweight filming equipment, we were off to Toronto on a one-third full flight. A good sleep was experienced by most.

May 15: This was a complete day of flights and airport wait time, including a 6-hour stay in the Barbados. Here we got a taxi ride to a local beach only 15 minutes away from the airport, where we bobbed in the beautiful waters of the Caribbean and drank our first Banks beer. We soon were touching down in Georgetown (8 P.M.), passing through customs with minimal delay. Donna went to her flat, and I soon followed to drop off the computer. Our hotel is the Cara Lodge, a beautiful 18th century wooden building of classic architecture.

May 16: 4 A.M. came far too fast, but soon after we

were flying in the small 12 seater, first to Annai (where I very briefly met Georgie, Colin’s teen-aged son, and Colin’s newest offspring of 2.5 years). Eight minutes after takeoff and a dramatic low-level flight over the green landscape, we touched down at the official Government Karanambo dirt strip, to the enthusiastic greetings of Diane McTurk. With the start of the wet season a bit ahead of schedule, the Rupununi has had three weeks of ever-increasing rain. The effect on the air quality and appearance of the land is wonderful, presenting an excellent introduction to the crew, and a reminder to me of how different the seasons are here.

I later talked with Colin over the radio, at length (at least 30 min), receiving several coldish remarks about the fact we were not using his lodge for at least one night. It was fun talking with him, however, and it would have been entertaining if we could have managed a visit to his place. Otters, however, have to be our main focus of this expedition, and with the costs already high enough, anything but our objective simply had to be weeded out

by Bryan as he planned our itinerary.

Very quickly half of our gear and all the crew were piled inside and on the back of Diane’s short-box Land Rover, a truck that has seen many, many difficult times, and we rumbled back to the Ranch, chatting all the way as the film crew did their filming. It was a ball to see how vibrant Diane still is, both of us chatting like chipmunks all the way back.

The landscape is rich having received so much rain, but the rains have apparently arrived with exuberance in the mountains upstream as evidenced with the swollen Rupununi River. In fact, the river is at least three meters higher than I have ever seen it, overflowing its banks in many areas, flooding the grasslands and part of the road back to the ranch. The views from the back of the Land Rover as we drove across the higher landscape stretched in a wide green vista to the mountains, revealing a striking panorama. What beautiful country.

After brunch, we went out onto the river, boating into

two oxbow lakes, Crane and Simoney Ponds, as an orientation to the area. Brian was able to film long-nosed bats fluttering like butterflies off a tree trunk, several howler monkeys huddled together, and later managed some excellent footage of a large (perhaps 2 meters) black caiman near the dock. He also full-framed a black-collared hawk, glowing rust-red in the late evening sun. In Crane Pond, the giant lily pads made for some wonderful footage.

Some of Diane's famous rum punches concluded the workday, followed by excellent discussions around the table during and after dinner, served with Diane's matriarchal flair. What an incredible woman: 70 years old, a ranch with 800 cattle to care for and run, and a guest lodge to run. She hasn't skipped a beat since I last saw her.

May 17: We awoke to a brilliant clear morning. After first doing some easy access pond exploration to capture magnificent reflections on film, we spent several hours in trail-making through some especially thick bush, by canoe, to carve a path to the Honey Ponds, following the flow of the flooding landscape. The theory is that the otters will be following the flood, as that is where the concentrated numbers of fish should be. I assume that the fish are there to exploit the newly flooded areas to access the new available food sources as the land fills with water. To cut the route, the bowman would continually hack with his cutter through the thick vegetation between

known ox-bow ponds. How they know where to lead into the bush is beyond me, as it's easy to see how a person could become hopelessly lost in the tangle.

This is hard work, often slowed by razor-sharp cut-grass that easily tears the skin if it gets a hold of you. At one point, we were all but halted by a nest of angry wasps! The men tossed some gasoline at the wasp nest itself, only receiving a few stings in the entire process. Their persistence paid off, however, as we were at last able to penetrate without incident.

Some parts of the canoe trails were stunningly beautiful. The forest is only a meter or so away from being fully flooded, and it will remain so for the next four months of the rainy season. In the full-canopy forests that we paddled through, there were only tree trunks with little or no underbrush. This presented an eerie and beautiful environment of tannin-stained water and dark reflections. When the sun came through, pools of tea-coloured water were nicely illuminated, making for great photography.

After several hot and non-productive hours cutting and pulling the boat over submerged logs, we gave up. Poor Diane was doing her best investing incredible energy into calling for the otters, to no avail. Her voice was beginning to give out.

Back at the lodge, Ashley Holland, the fellow who was one of our guides when we were here two years ago, had

dropped in to give some film to Diane to have developed. He joined us for lunch, and we heard about his new life living in an Amerindian village with one of Diane's previous kitchen staff! And he's now a father!

We delayed our 4 P.M. otter-search departure because of a huge rainstorm, a classical tropical downpour of incredible volume and intensity. Within an hour, though, the rain had stopped, the sky was blue, and all was good in the world. We spent the final hour of daylight boating upstream where Kenneth had seen otters about a week earlier, to a beautiful oxbow called Mobai Pond. No otters. We returned under rapidly darkening skies filled with careening nightjars flying like fluttering bats above the water. A brown-bearded saki sat in the dim light after sunset near our take-out point, too dark to photograph. His thick tail hung below the branch he sat on, and through the binoculars, I could see his bouffant hairstyle.

May 18: Determined to see otters, we awoke at 4 A.M. and were boating up the trail that we had cut yesterday soon after, exploring all seven Honey Ponds and their interlinking canoe trails. A hot un-productive morning was spent searching for the otters, though it was a beautiful experience with each of the five ponds that we encountered looking very fresh and calm in the morning light, especially after yesterday's rain. The trail was a snap to negotiate compared to yesterday, as the water had risen about a half

meter more since the rain, leaving us only one short stretch of bush to cut. Still no otters. And Diane's voice was beginning to sound strained: "*Come Zhivago, come Persephone, come Pluto, come Anya, come you lovely creatures, come you horrible beasts, come for fish fish fish.....*".

We left sometime in late morning, retracing our route, trying to remain positive. One highlight, however, was some excellent looks at a small group of white-faced sakis jumping from one tree canopy to the next. The white faces of the males were easily seen, though nearly impossible to photograph, they moved so quickly.

On the way back, Bryan suggested a "bounty" was needed, and after discussions with Diane, US\$30.00 was the decided upon amount. Diane broke the good news to the staff after we returned to the ranch, and lo, within minutes (by coincidence), our two assistant trail cutters in the second boat came back with word that THE OTTERS HAD BEEN FOUND!

I wish I could have adequately recorded the next 30 minutes of activity on video, but I'll try to give it justice verbally here:

- A motorcycle and driver immediately appeared and loaded up Brian and all his filming gear (a big tripod and his equally big camera),
- Bryan and Larry quickly organized

their Brazilian-made heavy clunker bicycles that were delivered with incredible efficiency, and strapped down their sound recording gear.

- Diane, as she barked orders that were efficiently followed with a speed I have never seen at Karanambo, picked up another clunker bike. With a string of slippery piranhas somehow strapped into the carrier (delivered by a hurried looking fisherman), she was off in a flash following the rest.
- And finally me, last because I was attempting to video this mayhem. A bike a bit worse for wear was handed to me, and I immediately went zipping along on it. This bike didn't have operational brakes, which I found out about too late, zipping around a bend at mach-five on the rutted dirt road, directly into a long and deep mud puddle, wiping out on the slippery mud, unable to escape the steep-sided mud-rut. It was a direct plunge right into the crater! Needless to say, I looked a mess.....but managed to clean up somewhat with

minimal ribbing by all once I had arrived at the flooded road where the boat was waiting. Everyone was buzzed with excitement and anticipation, and preoccupied with organizing their gear and position in the waiting boat.

We rapidly scurried into the boat, and Diane began her calling for "*you lovely beasts*"! We had paddled for no more than 10 tense minutes, looking in all directions for the otters' appearance. When from behind, two, then three, then four bug-eyed enthusiastic faces appeared in the mud-coloured water. At last success!

Diane quickly stepped out of the boat into the shallow water, string of fish in hand. At once with hardly any hesitation, the first two otters immediately took fish from her. The next thirty minutes consisted of excited, rushing, screaming otters coming and going combined with the crunching of fish bones as they ate. The otters would retreat a meter or two into the thicker vegetation as soon as they received their fish, to feed. One otter, Zhivago, grabbed a chunk of fish and retreated into the flooded bush to pass it off to a shy Anya! A very interesting behaviour indeed!

It was quite a sight: enthusiastic otters scrambled here and there, occasionally interacting with Diane briefly allowing her to play and pet them as the film crew did

their best to avoid getting in the way of the activity but trying to film what they could. At times Diane had to do some quick maneuvering to prevent the ankle of one of the crew from being bitten, as otters were scurrying this and that way in the water, careening for an opportunity to obtain a small fish from Diane.

Persephone and Pluto are the two unrelated female and male pair that Diane has hand raised. Zhivago and Anya joined these two. Last year, under the direction of the dominant male Zhivago, they killed 'Peter The Great', the otter Dee and I have known from our previous visits, in order to "acquire" his territory. The four have formed an alliance, and the two "tame" otters have "introduced" the two wild ones to an occasional free meal from Diane. The introduction process works both ways, it appears.

Brian and I managed some great footage. This moment made the trip, and we were all very happy and relieved the plan of doing this otter story had worked. We paddled back to the bicycles and the motorcycle left beside the flooded road, and headed back for lunch and a mid-day well-deserved break.

Taking advantage of the setting sun, Bryan orchestrated a very nice filming session of Diane sitting in a reflective moment at dusk by the river. As we filmed, brown capuchins were settling in for the night in a big tree in the background, emitting the odd

scream as they argued over what branch to sit on.

And the howler monkeys are calling in the distance as I write this journal. It's about 10 P.M., time for my bedtime.

May 19: We re-entered the labyrinth canoe trail system just after sunrise, travelling through four of the seven Honey ponds to Maricuba Pond, the biggest and most recently flooded (since last night!). Our logic suggested that the otters should have ventured to that area as it is the most recent to be flooded. We guessed there should be good hunting there for them.

We had no luck, but spirits were high from the success of yesterday, so we spent productive hours orchestrating several canoe filming segments: including an aerial view of the passing canoe, filmed by three agile monkeys from up in a tree; cutting through thick vegetation with the machete as we pulled the canoe; pulling the boat over fallen logs and vegetation; a segment on the flooding forest; and some nice birds and insect close-ups. After lunch we interviewed Diane on camera (an excellent interview), and captured a dramatic sunset. After a rum punch, we enjoyed some good dinner-time conversation as we consumed the Rupununi eco-friendly beef, compliments of Karanambo!

May 20: After breakfast I spent another 15 minutes at least talking to Colin over at Rockview on the radio, further justifying my lack of

communication and worse, my lack of utilization of his lodge for at least a night. I think I have managed to make some peace with him, and we agreed to keep in touch.

After that, we filmed a tableside interview with Diane pouring over some photographs of her past otters. The objective of the interview, as Bryan had briefed me, was to extract an answer from her that would neatly summarize up why she has such an affinity for otters and why she feels a sense of responsibility to them. Her answer was neatly put: she has a selfish interest in the otters that, thankfully, has spun into a valuable purpose for her "indulgence". One final short filming segment before we left the ranch consisted of doing a short camera follow of me doing a bit of "auto filming" by the boat put-in, setting up the film theme for our sequence of our actual finding of the otters.

After a delicious lunch of peacock bass (a cichlid species), and with an hour and a half leeway, we set off for one final boat ride through the Honey Ponds to the submerged airstrip road. Our jeep sat stranded, unable to now reach the ranch due to the rising waters, on the airstrip side of the flooded forest, waiting our arrival. The pilot had already called that they had taken off and will be more or less on time for a 2:30 P.M. landing on the dirt strip. The boat trip was highlighted with two perfect Jabiru storks sitting perfectly exposed on a branch right above our water trail.

And amazingly, they sat still long enough without flying for us to do some video!

In all, I guessed that the Rupununi River had come up at least a meter since our arrival, making it at least four meters above our last visit here in the dry season. The airport road that we had driven clear to the lodge was now officially impassible, and the jeep therefore will spend the next four months on the far side, ready for use for airport ferrying or trips to Lethem.

Once at the strip, we sat on our lonely luggage pile waiting for the “flying shoebox” to arrive. The vista in all directions was magnificent: clear air to the mountains to the south beyond Lethem, and the Pakaraimas to the North beyond Annai. The rich green grasslands studded with trees swept away to the horizon presenting a wonderful sense of freedom. Fair-weather clouds, a nice change from this morning’s rain showers, made periodic over-flights giving us temporary relief now and again from the sun. The aircraft landed 20 minutes late, coming straight in from Lethem. The flight to Georgetown presented some stunning views over the rainforest, then huge clouds billowed under, typically obliterating the afternoon views of any canopy.

We met up with Donna for a very nice poolside dinner of shrimp/chicken kabobs at the Pegasus Meridian Hotel.

May 21: By 8:30 we were set up at the otter exhibit at

the Zoo for filming with Diane. As the crew began filming, I met with Peter Khatoo, presenting him with the staple gun he had requested and a gift of a bottle of Canadian Club. We then met with Donald, the education director, renewing our friendship. I presented him with a gift of Canadian maple syrup (Donald doesn’t drink).

At the otter exhibit, things were well underway by the time I had arrived. Donna had spent 6 hours yesterday with the otter keeper draining and scrubbing the pool, then another 6 hours filling it back up, making the tank reasonably clean for the filming. The otter, Sushi, is a former pet, and hence, pretty excited about the arrival of her new “cage-mates”. Brian and Larry gingerly tiptoed around the sand, Brian sometimes cringing nervously when the otter sniffed into a few sensitive spots. However, all went well, and soon both Diane and I were right in the pool with the otter rocketing all around and playing between us. Sushi is obviously starved for attention, and was relishing these moments with her new found human friends. What a lovely animal, so gentle, and no biting even though she was so excited. It was an absolute highlight.

Filming with Diane was completed within two hours. Bryan sent her home with our driver, and we began doing some filming with some of the other animals. Donna took us into the margay enclosure. The housecat-sized spotted felid was at first

timid, but quickly lost its shyness once Donna revealed two parrot feathers to do a bit of cat-and-mouse play. We got some wonderful footage. Some time was spent in several of the other cages, with Donna organizing the keepers to let us in with the parrots, egrets, tapirs and jabiru storks.

It was a very successful day, thanks to Donna getting everything ready for us. She even went out to Peter’s home the other day, which is some distance away, to arrange for him to come to the Zoo (he was in the middle of his 6-week leave!). Bryan took us all out for lunch to an outdoor rooftop restaurant beside the classic old train station near the portside market. After, he announced that it would be important for the men to experience the men-only rum bar, next door. Donna suggested we would rendezvous for dinner at a Chinese Restaurant later, so the boys could do their thing.

The Men Only Rum Bar was a large room with a high roof, an upstairs affair, bright with big open windows allowing for a good breeze. A large snooker table (complete with some ripped felt) dominated the center, surrounded by enthusiastic players. Peter purchased a half-bottle of 5-year old rum, a coke, and a bottle of water. Larry made the mistake of pouring out nearly the entire bottle between the 5 of us as Peter was paying the bill, much to the bartender and Peter’s horror! Apparently the custom is to pour an ounce of each of the above three ingredients, drink it as a shooter, then talk talk talk,

then do it all over again 'til the bottle is gone. Needless to say, the bottle disappeared fairly fast, so another was ordered.

By 6 P.M. it was time to head on our way, first walking to the dock to see Peter off on his ferry to the other side of the river where he lives. The walk through the port area was an experience to remember: for a moment we flashed back in time to 100 or more years ago. Dark hallways, people loitering all over, high roofed 150 year-old buildings, all unpainted or peeling, all dark with the grime only a part of this age can produce. Classic third world, with the human element assaulting all of one's senses.

Donna and Graham Watkins from Iwokrama were already seated by the time we arrived at the restaurant. Graham was in good form, and we had some excellent discussions over some equally excellent food. Later, after arriving back at the Cara Lodge, the young and restless were suggesting the night was still young. Barbarians, all of them. Bryan noticed a diplomatic party was in full swing upstairs and immediately proclaimed he "was going in!" Of course, we followed.

We were soon sipping some rum, chatting with the guests and dignitaries (including the Minister of Agriculture). One interesting couple we talked at length with was a New Yorker turned organic farm produce seller, and his charming girlfriend Lila Ram. They had some interesting stories of their

Rupununi travels, to Colin and Diane's and places in between.

The evening somewhat petered out when the four of us decided to head to the "happinin' Buddy's Night Club" on Sheriff Street after the diplomatic event finished. We expected to watch some of the dancing the Guyanese are famous for, but on Monday night, not a chance. Instead we played some pool and watched one young lady do some nice dancing for her boyfriend (pimp?). Fortunately we were back at the hotel sometime shortly after midnight.

May 22: Donna took us on a shopping trip to first buy hammocks at one of her local favorite sellers (I paid CND\$70 for a very nice Brazilian made hammock, but Larry got a very decent one for half that). The Amerindian Hostel also did well by us, as did a few shops in between. After lunch, Bryan, Brian and Larry went back to the hotel, and Donna and I went to the Zoo to do some filming of her volunteers for the Zoo video I will assemble for them.

She has trained about 7 or 8 volunteers, equipped them with very smart looking T-shirts, and have given them the necessary supplies to do some of the very important interpretation to the Zoo public. Apparently on Saturday, the keepers only work until 2 P.M., leaving the Zoo a "free-for-all" after that. With the volunteer presence there, it allows for not only an educational component there, but a policing force as well.

On returning to the hotel to meet up for dinner with the crew, I popped by Diane's place as planned to pick up 4 bottles of her famous rum punch, one for each of us! I had asked to purchase one bottle from her for Dee, but she insisted on giving us each one as a gift! I shared a rum punch with her and her roommate, Wendolyn, showing them the still photos on the video and some short segments of the wild otters we filmed a few days ago.

Donna joined us for dinner, sharing a few Guyanese sayings: "Rest yourself": to let you know you should relax, take it easy, don't let it bug you; "Gaffing": talking talking; "Ahh, me head is swing": I feel dizzy; and in response to "How are you?" one can reply "Tryin' wit it" or "You know, tryin'".

We also decided that Bryan, considering he is the boss of this production, now be officially called "Funny Boy Big Man Bryan". We need to consider T-shirts or caps with this. Larry also reminded us that "The whooping crane has enough power in his bill to crush a human skull", which is a statement made by Captain Diana on board his tourist vessel off the coast of Texas on a whooping crane tour he was on. Yes, spirits are high. It's been an excellent experience and a great TV shoot.

May 23: We were up at 2:30 A.M. for the one-hour airport trip, to catch our flight to Trinidad, Toronto, then Calgary. The humidity was high as it had just poured rain, and the frogs were

obviously enjoying the tropical heat, pinging away as only the tropics can produce. An excellent send-off.

Arrival in Calgary was uneventful at 6 pm as planned. Time to go home and see my sweetie and check out progress in our yard.