

# CALL OF GUYANA

By Carla Thornton

NANCY AND BRIAN Cullity loved traveling to exotic places and they loved birds. The Cape Cod couple saw wild parrots in Guatemala, Panama, Venezuela and half a dozen other Central and South American countries. On one trip they spent three weeks hiking through the Amazon jungle.

"We always tried to get as far away as possible from civilization," said Brian. At home, the Cullitys doted on a Senegal parrot named Sebastian adopted from Foster Parrots, a Boston-area sanctuary for homeless birds.

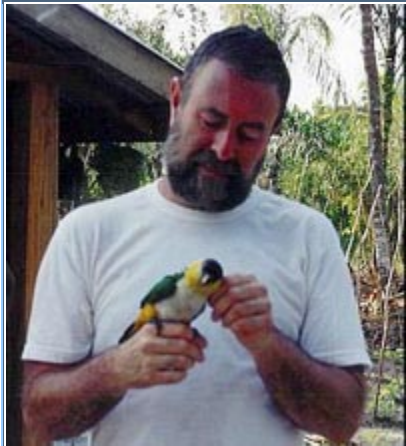
In 2000 Nancy was diagnosed with cancer, but instead of cancelling their trips, the Cullitys stepped up the pace. "I said, 'That's it,'" recalls Brian. "Memories are more important than possessions. We took out a second mortgage and put all our effort and money into traveling as much as we could."



Adventurer and parrot lover Nancy Cullity inspired Guyana to protect its wildlife. (Photo courtesy of Brian Cullity.)

That December, the Cullitys decided to visit Guyana, a small country about the size of Idaho tucked between Suriname and Venezuela. Perhaps best known as the site of the Jonestown massacre in 1978, Guyana is a hot and humid nation buffeted by two rainy seasons. Although English speaking, it is poor, with much of its sparse population of 750,000 living in huts with no electricity or running water. But Guyana is rich in natural resources and animal life ranging over rainforests to rolling highlands, low coastal plains, a southern savanna and a 270-mile-long Atlantic shoreline. To the Cullitys, it sounded like the perfect getaway.

Determined to have an authentic experience, the Cullitys avoided established ecotourist destinations in favor of St. Cuthbert's Parrish, a 100-year-old Arawak village in the northern part of the country. In Pakuri, the village's Indian name, the Cullitys enjoyed camping and getting to know the residents, even staying for a time with the village patriarch, whose son-in-law, Damon Corrie, was their guide.



Brian Cullity pets a caique while on vacation in Guyana. (Photo courtesy of Brian Cullity.)

### **A friendship forms**

Corrie took the Cullitys deep into the rainforest, where they were the first white people to see a stone temple once used for human sacrifices. The Cullitys politely partook of bushmeat, including such delicacies as tapir. They marveled at the sight of green-wing macaws, Amazons and other parrots flying overhead, and they played with the villagers' pet caiques. They also chatted at length with Corrie, a Barbados businessman who was also a hereditary Arawak Indian chieftain trying to help his countrymen improve their standard of living by bringing tourists to Guyana.

Guyana had a wilderness preservation and animal exportation problem, Corrie admitted. Unlike neighboring Suriname, which boasted vast tracts of protected land for habitat preservation and national parks, Guyana had only one national park, which represented less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the entire country. Many Guyanans, while mainly employed in mining and agriculture, actively trapped not only parrots but wild cats, reptiles and sea turtles for food and the pet trade. Guyana was one of the top exporters of wild parrots in the world, with 30,000 birds sent annually to Europe and Asia.

Trappers got \$8 for every Amazon parrot they captured and \$25 for a scarlet or greenwing macaw, a lot of money in a country where the average annual income was \$1,000. As in other poor nations that exported birds for the pet trade, the trappers were not picky about the way they did their work. They used glue, which sometimes resulted in birds losing their feet, or they lured birds to blinds and snared them by the neck using loops at the ends of fishing poles. To prevent the captured birds from flying away, the trappers pulled their feathers out one by one or chopped them off with a machete, sometimes crippling the wing.

The Cullitys returned home concerned by what they had learned but inspired by Guyana's potential. They became long-distance friends with Corrie, staying in touch by e-mail. When another guide lost his home in a fire, they sent \$500 to help him rebuild.

The Pakuri villagers looked forward to the couple's return. "I was hoping to show them other wonders of the rainforest," said Corrie.



A green-wing macaw hitches a ride from an Amerindian boy in Guyana. (Photo courtesy of Damon Corrie.)

It was not to be. Nancy Cullity died May 25, 2002, at the age of 46.

"We didn't even know she was ill," said Corrie. "I was shocked. I cried, knowing how close Brian and Nancy were."

#### **Nancy's law**

After Nancy's death, Brian Cullity sent \$2,000 to Corrie to be spent on the Arawak community as he saw fit. Corrie gratefully used the money to buy books and videos for a village library.

Still, Cullity did not feel like he had done enough to honor Nancy's memory. Restless to travel again and now the chairman of the board for Foster Parrots, Cullity invited the group's founder

and director, Marc Johnson, to take a trip with him.

"I had to get away," said Cullity. "I said, 'Hey, Marc, let's go to Guyana.'"

Cullity and Johnson wound up back in Pakuri, where Johnson met Corrie, and once again, the plight of Guyana's parrots came up. This time the talk turned serious. Corrie wanted to establish an ecotourism industry to help preserve wildlife and his people's way of life. But how to attract U.S. tourists to little Pakuri? As Johnson pointed out, they needed more than "a few macaws flying by".

Johnson suggested a plan based on the work of conservationist and parrot expert Dr. Charles Munn, whose own ecotourism efforts have preserved endangered parrots and natural habitat in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Brazil. The men decided their ecotourism project in Guyana could do the same things as Munn's: protect existing parrots, reintroduce birds to decimated areas, and provide the natives with tourism income so they didn't have to rely on trapping to survive.

While Johnson and Corrie headed back to Massachusetts to write Guyana's first bird-protection law, Corrie began the job of convincing the Pakuri chieftain that an ecotourism project was a good idea.

In September 2003, not quite three years after the Cullitys' first visit to Guyana, the Arawak Nation signed into law the Nancy Lewis Cullity Parrot Protection Act. It forbids hunting parrots and other animals in the 240-square-mile, 1,000-person Pakuri Arawak territory for food or the pet trade.



Workers in Pakuri, Guyana, admire several young ete palms planted to attract macaws. (Photo courtesy of Marc Johnson.)

### **Palms and parrots**

Nancy's law was only the beginning. In the last year, the three men have hired Pakuri locals to begin replanting hundreds of ete palms to attract large macaws, which favor the palm's lime-size nut. The ete takes 15 to 20 years to mature and, unfortunately for birds, villagers like it, too - for its leaves, used for weaving baskets. "It has a lot of commercial value," said Johnson.

Workers also have begun building a series of dual-purpose observation platforms that can also serve as campsites.

"We'll monitor nesting activity from the platforms, maintaining records on the numbers of active nests and successfully fledged chicks. We can also use the platforms to guard against nest raiding," said Johnson.

The men are not yet sure where they will get the greenwing macaw chicks for their hand-raising and reintroduction program. With the Guyanan government's cooperation, they

might be able to intercept some of the trapped babies destined for shipment out of the country, said Johnson.

Another option is rescuing chicks that would not otherwise survive in the wild. "In many macaw species, only one chick is normally raised to adulthood," said Johnson. "Second or third chicks are usually killed by their siblings or starved by the parents. We would like to rescue these extra chicks, hand-raise them and 'hack' them back into the wild." In similar reintroduction programs, such as Munn's, these human-raised macaw chicks have successfully adapted to life in the wild, even taking wild mates, said Johnson.



Adventure travelers to Nancy Cullity-protected territories in Guyana will stay in comfortable thatched-roof lodges like this one. (Photo courtesy of Marc Johnson.)

### **Raising a lodge**

Cullity and Johnson will return to Guyana again in December 2004 - it will be the fifth visit for Cullity - to pick out building sites, with construction beginning in early 2005.

Pakuri probably will be a stopover nature destination, said Johnson, with a larger lodge built in Toka, a more remote territory where a larger variety of parrots can be found and the villagers still practice traditional customs

such as making blowguns.

"The villages down south rarely see outsiders. Tourists will get to see cultures that have held onto their ancestral teachings and arts and crafts," said Johnson.

Although not four-star accommodations by U.S. standards, the lodges will be cushy compared to most Guyanan homes. They will have two bedrooms with beds protected by mosquito netting, traditional thatched roofs and open-air shuttered windows. The separate bathrooms will have modern flushing toilets and shower stalls, using water pumped up from nearby rivers. Guests will eat in outdoor dining areas served by thatched-roof kitchens.

Eventually, more villages are expected to join the effort, establishing their own Nancy Cullity protected areas for parrots, said Johnson. The result will be an ever-growing chain of "wildlife fortresses" throughout the country, where animals will be protected and tourists can see wild parrots up close.

In the meantime, the Nancy Cullity lodge stopovers will be offered as a part of tour packages including other, more established destinations in Guyana.

"We foresee taking groups to Pakuri or Toka for a night or two, then on to Karanambu, a working cattle ranch that features giant otters; and a final stop at the Kaieteur Falls," said Cullity. "Kaieteur is the world's largest single-drop waterfall at 750 feet, four times the height of Niagara."

The cost of a Nancy Cullity adventure vacation probably will be "on the inexpensive side," said Cullity. "We want to attract people first and foremost." Guyanan nature lodges range from \$75 to \$350 a night double occupancy.

### **\$10 a day**

The Guyana ecotourism project has been "overwhelming," admitted Cullity, an antiques dealer by trade. There is still a lot to sort out, including exactly whom will oversee what in the final operation. Currently, Corrie is managing the day-to-day building, with Johnson set to book tours and Cullity assigned the duty of investigating new destinations for project expansion.

Others have offered their moral support for the project, including famed conservationist Jane Goodall. However, so far, Johnson and Cullity have paid for everything out of their own pockets. In November 2004 they will know whether they will receive \$18,000 in grant money to cover the first year of construction.

Convincing the Amerindians that ecotourism is the answer to their problems is a separate matter. "They're so poor and have been so poor for so long, they think we're rich and want immediate satisfaction," said Cullity. "We have to make sure they understand this is long term, that it will take a while. Our main goal is to see some type of financial reward come back to the Amerindians and educate them how valuable their natural resources are."

Johnson hopes that giving villagers a way to make money apart from trapping parrots is the answer. Each Nancy Cullity lodge will need cooks, maids, managers, nest builders and baby bird hand-feeders. Workers will make about \$10 a day, a handsome wage. Eventually, the lodges will be community owned and maintained.

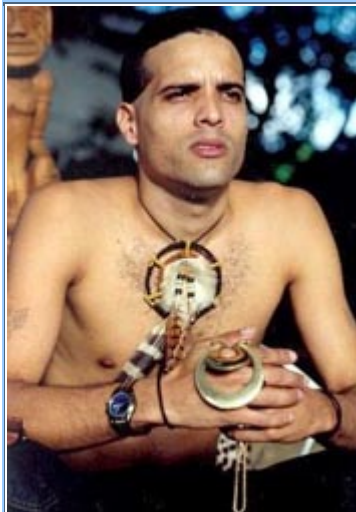
Once the villages can show that ecotourism works on their own lands, Johnson hopes the national government will begin to regard the vast remaining wilderness of Guyana as a resource to be protected, not harvested.

"Foster Parrots and our supporters have a rare and important opportunity to play a pivotal role in influencing the expansion of protected territory in a country whose natural resources have experienced decades of mismanagement and exploitation," he said.



Wild Amazon parrots captured for the pet trade await exportation in Georgetown, Guyana. (Photo courtesy of Marc Johnson.)

Birds are not the only native animals that Corrie hopes to help. A low-sided pen he built eventually will house 25 endangered red-footed and yellow-footed tortoises rescued from Georgetown meat markets. The animals typically are kept upside-down on their carapaces on the hot pavement until purchased by shoppers who then hack them to death with machetes.



Damon Corrie, shown here in Arawak tribal dress, hopes to help the people - and animals - of Guyana by bringing in more tourist dollars. (Photo courtesy of [Damon Corrie](#).)

Ultimately, the three men hope to convince the government of Guyana to stop exporting the country's animals. On an early fact-finding trip, Cullity and Johnson sneaked pictures at an export station in Georgetown where they saw dozens of parrots and a jaguar in cramped cages awaited shipment.

"Any entity that identifies itself as a zoo in need of a particular animal and is willing to pay a 'substantial reward' is generally accommodated by the Guyana government," said Cullity.

#### **A refuge for Nancy**

The Nancy Cullity ecotourism project means different things to the men who created it. For Johnson, Guyana is Foster Parrot's biggest effort yet toward protecting parrots in the wild and a chance to show people how their feathered pets were really meant to live. "In order for people to understand the injustice of captivity, it's vital for them to see birds in the wild," he said. "Parrots belong in the wild and we believe we need to protect them there - not buy into the false argument that breeding in captivity is the only way to preserve them."

For the urbanite Corrie, the project is a chance to fulfill his cultural destiny. "How could I face my ancestors when my time comes if I did nothing to help my people, knowing that the inherited responsibility was mine to bear?" he said.

When Brian and Nancy Cullity visited Guyana four years ago, the trip appeared to be just another completed adventure on a long list of adventures they hoped to cross off before time ran out. While the couple often talked about how they might send a little something back to the poor communities they visited, "Nancy and I certainly never envisioned a project such as this," said Cullity.

So in one way, Cullity is surprised to find himself in his current position, launching an ecotourism effort that bears his wife's name and could change the fortunes of the people and animals in a faraway country for the better.

Then again, the whole thing makes perfect sense. "Nancy had a deep and abiding love and interest in the Amerindians, flora and fauna of Latin America, with a special love for the parrots," he said. "Any lasting contribution we can make in helping preserve these

cultures and great expanses of forest and grasslands would be a most fitting honor for one who was so passionate in her life."