

REDD+ Fire: Disparate Intentions in Contemporary Approaches to Fire Governance

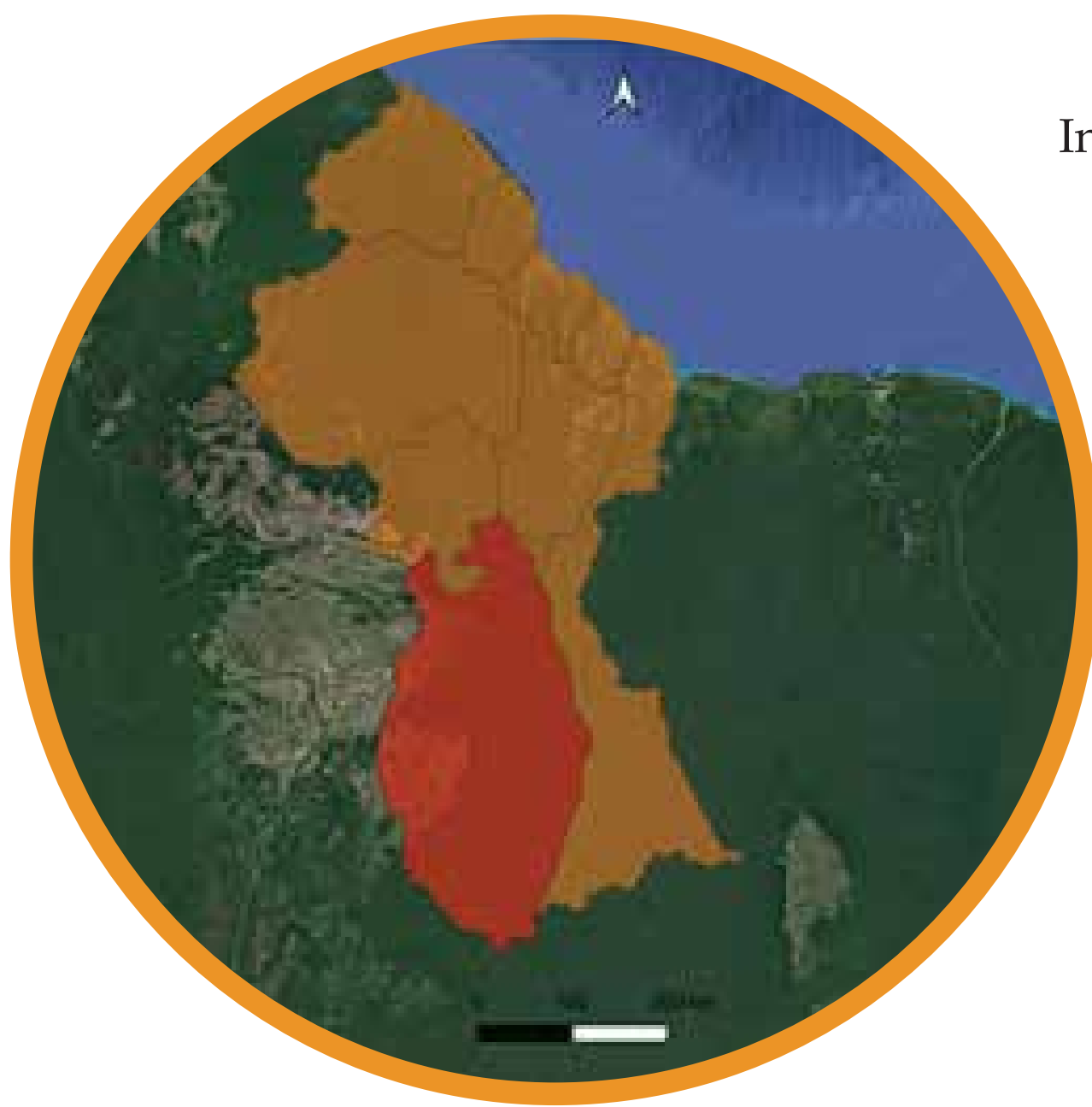
A case study (chapter) from the thesis Changing Practices of Indigenous Burning Practices in South Rupununi, Guyana

Kayla de Freitas (PhD student)
Supervisor: Jay Mistry

Study site: South Rupununi, Guyana
Royal Holloway University of London

Fire has been part of peoples' culture and livelihoods all over the world. Historically, Indigenous and Local burning practices has been suppressed by colonial and contemporary governments, with policies influenced by the perception that fires were destructive and played no role in savanna ecosystems (Moura et al., 2019). There is a global shift to recognising the value of Indigenous fire knowledge and burning practices in managing wildfires and biodiversity conservation (Hoffman et al., 2021). Accompanying this recognition is the advocating for the incorporation of Indigenous and local burning techniques into carbon-based Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) mechanisms like the United Nations REDD+ climate change mitigation programme. This approach is touted as an opportunity for communities to have control over fire management and contribute to global emissions reduction (Russell-Smith et al., 2017). Yet, these projects are also critiqued for sidelining Indigenous participation and governance, further marginalising the multiplicity and seasonality of Indigenous fire use. Instead these approaches 'pick' the local burning techniques, such as early dry season burning, that best suits state approaches for reducing carbon emissions (Petty, deKoninck and Orlove, 2015; Mistry and Berardi, 2016; Laris, 2021).

Guyana's case: REDD+ readiness and contemporary approaches to fire governance



In contrast to the global experience, there has been no direct suppression of fire in the Rupununi savannas. In the absence of state presence in the region, Indigenous communities have retained relatively strong traditional rights over fire use and land management. This unique case has allowed the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC), an Indigenous representative body, to build upon Wapichan and Macushi traditional management. This includes creating a fire calendar and a territorial management plan outlining customary and community-created policy on fire use.

Guyana has been part of the REDD+ programme monitoring deforestation rates since 2009 (Laing, 2018). A REDD+ readiness programme was carried out to make sure Guyana was 'ready' for REDD+; part of this process included pilot projects to 'test' how REDD+ benefits could be distributed to Indigenous communities. In the wake of a particularly bad fire year (2017/2018), Shulinab Village saw REDD+ as an opportunity to build on previous local efforts to create an integrated fire management strategy focused on the fire calendar and traditional burning.

What happened in Shulinab's REDD+ project?

"We started a fire project...under REDD+...somewhere in that pilot the ideas got strayed because the program really focused more on stopping fires, training people to use these equipment, but the whole idea was to actually use the seasons, use the traditional knowledge to do fire management, and not just sending out people to out fire when you see fire. Knowing when to burn, certain areas that need fire or need to ease up" (Community Leader, April 2021).

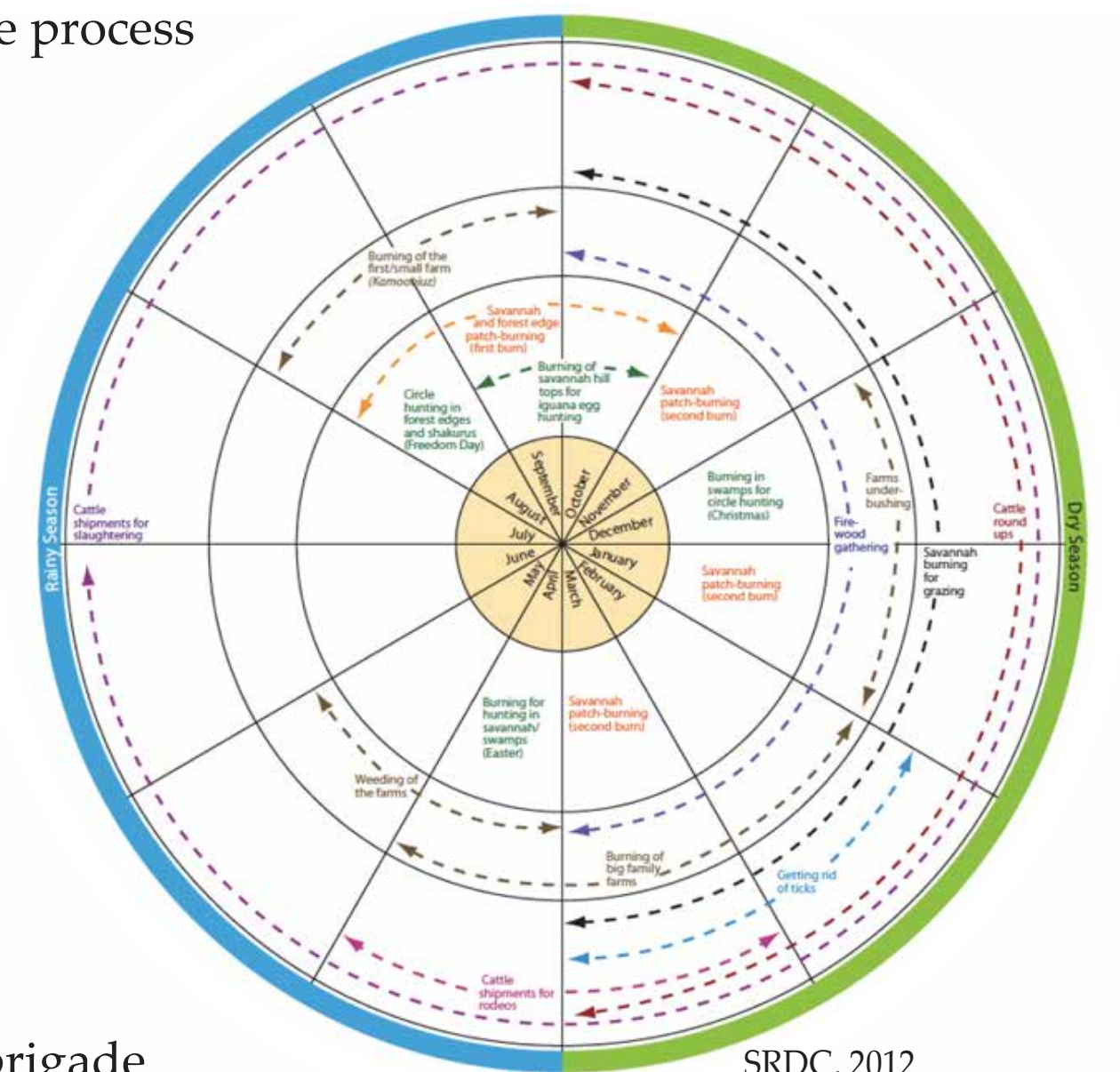
Challenges: Systematic flaws in implementation

Knowledge and comprehension of REDD+: Despite REDD+ being in Guyana for over 10 years, the process remains unclear. Those involved in the fire project were not aware it was a REDD+ funded programme.

Introduction of new governing bodies: Confusion about fire governance roles led to increased tension between the village council, the village, and the newly established fire brigade.

Lack of continuity: Insufficient funding support to ensure sustainability of local REDD+ initiatives. REDD+ pilots in Indigenous communities were used to 'test' benefit systems, but no clear mandate or structure to distribute monetary benefits from abatement efforts.

Focus on combative approaches: Project focused on fire-fighting and training of a new village fire brigade on suppression techniques, prescribed burning, and responding to savanna fires.



SRDC, 2012

Methods

1. Semi-structured interviews
2. Analysis of fire project documents
3. Focus group discussions
4. Drone photo and video elicitation
5. Ethnographic methods
6. Long stays at site with host family
7. Participant observation
8. Transect walks
9. Accompanying events and burning activities



Successes: Making the most of the 'lessons learnt'

Managing escaped farm fires: While not a major focus of the project, the community found the assistance provided by the brigade helpful in controlling escaped farm fires in the peak dry season.

Mapping of vulnerable areas: Through a participatory mapping exercise, the community was able to produce a map of areas they wanted to control fire (either put more or less fire).

Training as a form of revitalisation: The community helped select residents who formed the fire brigade. There were several elders who used the project training in burning as an opportunity to talk to the younger members about traditional burning practices.

Continuing the discussion: The base and interest is there, the community is continuing the conversation and wishes to use the lessons learnt from this project to forward their fire governance goals.

Local pride: Despite the challenges, this project is said to have produced the first Indigenous fire brigade in Guyana and is considered important in the community.

Disconnect between REDD+ carbon emissions goals and local management needs

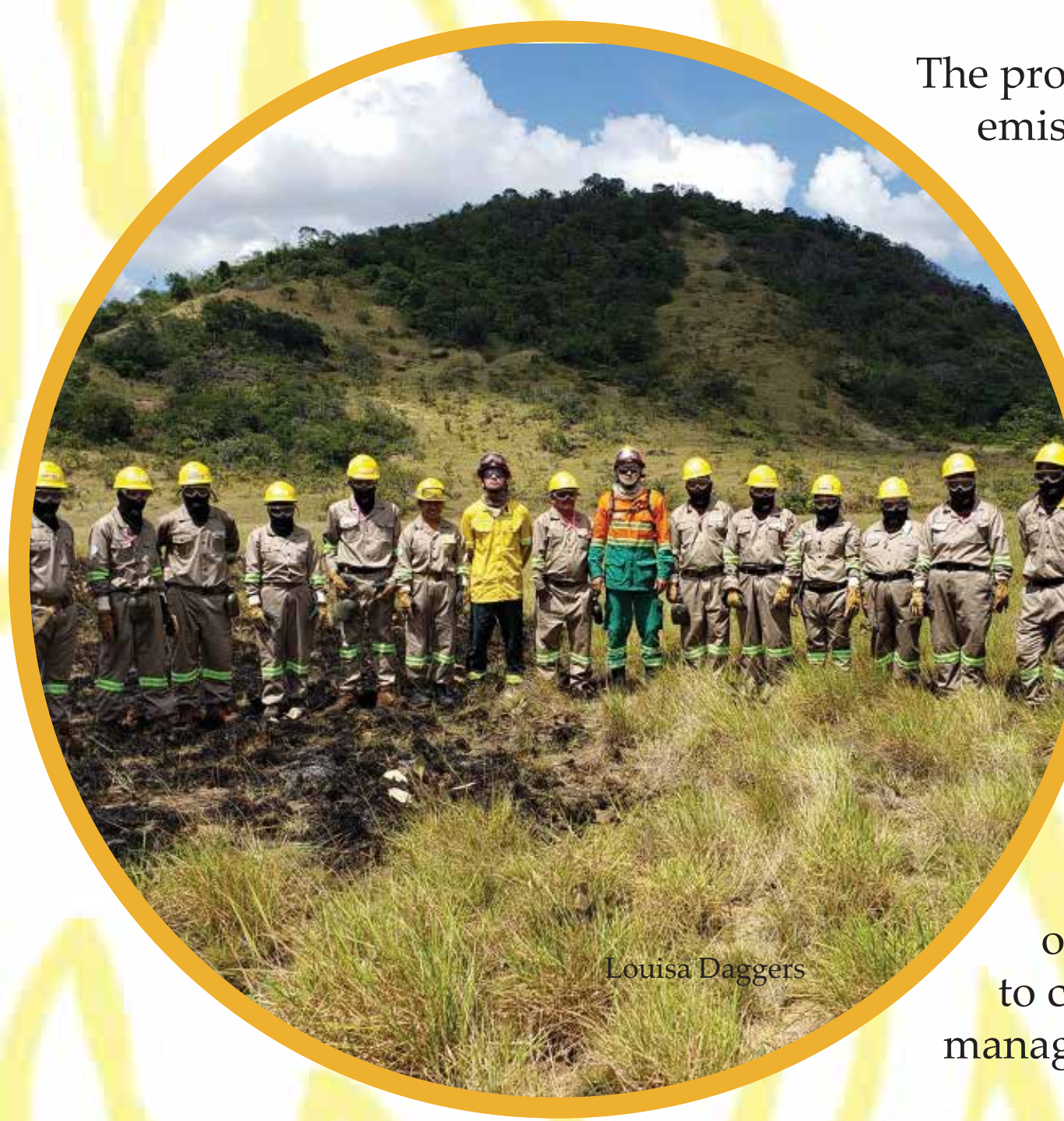


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Shulinab aimed to build upon traditional management systems using the fire calendar as a guide to designing an integrated plan supported by a promised structure that would ensure benefits for their abatement efforts.

The goals for Shulinab included: protection of livelihoods, land management, and revitalisation (through education and practice) of burning.

Shulinab (and the government) had access to a foundation from which to work (fire calendar, fire management plan, a fire study on traditional burning practices, and a goal of revitalisation of traditional fire governance)



Louisa Dangers

The project went ahead with no state structure for emission abatement and benefit sharing.

The project goals were centred on emissions reduction techniques including the banning of fire associated with hunting and focused on prescribed burning specifically to protect forests.

The project focused on dominant approaches using combative and suppressive techniques. This undermined the opportunity for Shulinab (and the government) to create a bottom-up community-centred fire management plan

References

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