



The Land of Many Waters

Benita Davis

Guyana

Benita Davis grew up on the beautiful Caribbean coast. As a young child, all she had to do was walk out of her home in a middle-class neighborhood in Georgetown, Guyana, cross the Rupert Craig Highway, and she would be at the ocean, where the broad expanse of brown waters meets the horizon.

In Guyana, water and life are inextricably connected. From the majestic Kaieteur and Marshall waterfalls in the north of the country, to the Essequibo River, which snakes through more than 1,000 kilometers of this South American country, Guyana's waterways give the country its indigenous name: "the land of many waters."

But Benita never truly understood the importance of water until she followed it away from the ocean, and into the interior of her tropical country, along the Essequibo. When she was in University, Benita and a group of researchers traveled to the center of the country to assess the water quality of the rivers while spending time with and learning from the indigenous community who live there. It was for her final year thesis.

For several weeks, Benita slept in a hammock, fished in the rivers, and hunted in the forests. She spent time with indigenous leaders whose families had lived in the country's interior for centuries. They taught her the basics of living off the grid, and emphasized the importance of being in tune with the sacred water of the river. There, without cellphone service, and temporarily free from the distractions of the screens and radio waves she was used to, she was able to fully connect with the rhythms of the earth.

"The leader's seven-year-old grandson was so shocked to know that even though I was an adult I didn't know how to hunt, or where I needed to go on the river to catch certain fish. Or even how to steer a canoe!" she says. "That's when it struck me that for the indigenous people, the river is much more than a food source; it's also their cultural heritage, transportation, and recreation."

Having studied environmental science in college, she did know, however, that the waters of that sacred river were being polluted by mercury. And two weeks in the interior forced her to reckon with what might happen to Guyana's indigenous population if the pollution of the river continues. "They have no other means of survival," she says.

As a child, Benita had always been drawn to the natural world. Growing up in a city and attending school in the capital, Georgetown, she didn't have many opportunities to learn about environmental issues. But she did what she could. She joined her school's environment club, went on "green walks," and participated in a scout's program that allowed her to go on several trips to the country's interior.

When she was first admitted to the University of Guyana, she had planned to study to become a nutritionist. But then she decided to follow her heart and study environmental science instead. She was shocked to learn what a devastating impact the mining companies were having on Guyana's environment. The two smallest countries in South America – Guyana, and neighboring Suriname— alone account for 10 to 15 percent of the entire nation's freshwater resources. However, the mining practices of the 40,000 artisanal gold miners who work along the rivers in Guyana are threatening the water quality. And the recent discovery of vast oil deposits in the country is making it easier for people to strike it rich; but it also poses an existential threat to the environment.

Benita realized that for many people in her country, the problem is basic: they simply don't understand the importance of protecting the water. "I decided that if I could help students, teachers, and youth groups develop an appreciation for the importance of protecting freshwater, it could filter down into their homes and communities. The problem needs to be tackled by all age groups and demographics," she says. "Many adults aren't aware of how their activities can affect this precious resource. We need to help everyone, regardless of their level of education or economic background, to understand that water is essential for life."

After she graduated from the University of Guyana, Benita began to volunteer with Policy Forum Guyana, where she learned about various educational tools to help inspire young people to take action for the environment. And she took an environmental workshop called Sandwatch, where she was connected and learned from global scientists and educators.

Sandwatch is an interdisciplinary educational process through which students, teachers, and local communities work together in the field to monitor coastal environments; identify and evaluate the threats, problems, and conflicts facing them; and develop sustainable approaches for addressing them. With the Sandwatch approach, involved groups not only learn to understand their environment; they also develop critical thinking skills, and learn how to apply them to conflict resolution. Sandwatch seeks to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning, through a practical hands-on approach, empowering citizens of all ages to become involved in positive environmental and social change.

Benita's exposure to Sandwatch impressed upon her the importance of getting young people to start thinking about the environment from an early age through hands-on activities, like going out into their communities to monitor water quality, observing how climate change is affecting beaches, and learning what must be done to offset the dire impacts of climate change and natural disasters. She also wanted to make environmental activism fun for kids. Inspired by the Sandwatch approach, which incorporates a range of disciplines, from biology to woodwork, from geography to art, and from poetry to mathematics—and following her lifelong passion for cartoons and games, she set out to develop a game about preserving freshwater resources. The game she created, the River Guardian Freshwater board game, is now in the process of being distributed to students across the country.

Meanwhile, the environmental movement in Guyana has begun to steadily increase, and what was once a small trickle of activism has become a steady stream. On September 29, 2019 Benita, with the help of volunteers, organized a rally in solidarity with Greta Thunberg's global Fridays for Future movement, which brought more than 500 youth climate activists into the streets of Georgetown. Many of them carried signs and banners proclaiming their fight as river guardians. Others called for people to protect the ocean, which is steadily rising and threatening the homes and communities of coastal residents.

Guyana's government has taken notice of this growing, and increasingly vocal, movement. The "Green State Development Strategy" is now a key part of President David Granger's development plan for the country; and the country's Ministry of Communities recently launched a #GreenGenerationGy hashtag as a way to bring more youth into the movement.

"At first, no one really wanted to support teaching climate change in the schools," Benita says. "But then, literally after seeing what was happening globally, a lot of people became interested in being a part of this movement." It was called the River Guardian Project. The board game Benita invented has also turned heads around the world. The government of the Netherlands even reached out to her to see how they could get involved in producing more educational games for kids.

Benita realizes that it's not just young people who need to become sensitized to the importance of freshwater resources, but all of the people of Guyana. She sees her job as letting both young people and adults know that everyone can play a role in becoming a river guardian—and everyone is needed in the effort.

Now that she's graduated from university, Benita is focusing all of her efforts on activism: she spends a lot of time meeting with representatives of NGOs and government officials. But she hasn't forgotten the people whose rights she's defending: the people of the indigenous communities who taught her how to be one with the river. And she recognizes her privileged situation.

“If I didn't have the experience of being in the interior myself, without clean food and water, I wouldn't have truly understood how dependent the people who live there are on the rivers; and how urgent it is for us to fix this matter. Because they've been drinking this water, with mercury in it, all the time,” she says. “I only had to drink it for two weeks.” She pauses, then adds, “Hopefully by getting the message out to both young and old, it will lead to a change in the way we view this land of many waters.”

Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.

W. H. Auden

Call to Action Clean water is essential to sustaining human life. Learn more about Sandwatch at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/priority-areas/sids/sandwatch/>

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