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**the HEART** of  
*El Dorado*

**By Dr. Riley Love**  
**Photos Steve Yatomi**



A

ll the rivers of the world have a commonality. Upon their banks, whether in the Yukon, the Himalayas or Amazonia, mankind has paused and fallen into meditative trance. Compelled by their flow; the irrefutable metaphor for pas-sage of one's own life and the unspooling of history, they've reflected that as their dust settled once again into the earth, their watery essence would flow back down such a river to its origin in the sea.

This river, the clear and dark Essequibo is especially compelling. Reduced into its rocky skeletal track during Guyana's dry season, my perch on its bank is fifty feet above the brief class 3 rapids below. After our charter landed on the grassy strip in the Amerindian village of Apoteri, where it tributes to the larger Rupununi for which this district is named, we came four hours upriver to this new clearing of thatched huts by small boat. Every inch was worth it- this place is pristine. No other mark of humanity mars its wild perfection.

Fifty years of destination fishing and the changing world has made these places so difficult to find. Costa Rica now resembles the Florida of my youth and Florida is too much becoming Manhattan. The rugged grandeur of Pacific Panama is parceling into boutique communities. Manaus, Brazil- headquarters for the worldwide populace of peacock bass fishermen, is like Grand Central Station transiting their advance up the Amazon Basin.

The only company at first light is a goodly squadron of tapirs, playing ungulate Marco Polo near the far side of the river. They impress with their breath holding. Like all fishermen, I watch for signs.

All of my early heroes were philosophers at the water's edge. Sir Walter Scott, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Kipling, Tolstoy, Hemingway...but particularly Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness*. Inevitable to recall his protagonist Marlowe, who "traveled too far" up the Congo seeking ivory but found his antagonist Kurz, brilliant but too mad to endure. They were transcribed into cardiac case Martin Sheen and the porcine Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

"Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth



Unchanged in the fossil record for the last 23 million years, the arapaima, also known as pirarucu or paiche is a true survivor, a “living dinosaur.” A specimen was taken to Europe in 1847 and for years was felt to represent a single species, *Arapaima gigas*. Subsequently it was subdivided into *A. arapaima*, *A. agassizii*, **A. mapae**, and then in 2013 a new species *A. leptosoma* or “slender body” was described.

An obligate air breather, it has no true lung but some oxygen exchanging tissue in its air bladder. It has to surface and gulp air every 10 to 20 minutes. This gives it an advantage in oxygen depleted water but makes it vulnerable to harpooning by a new local species, *Homo sapiens*.

They are voracious feeders, growing by double digit kilos per year. In the ponds we fished, despite large numbers of peacock bass nests, few peacocks were hooked except in protected areas. We did see some greyhounding across the surface for their lives. These babies were the *Arapaima gigas*- “the big boys.”

We restricted our technique to artificial lures resembling red belly piranhas or peacocks. Steve Yatomi found their mortality greatly increased with bait fishing with their corpses floating up many days later. He has tried circle hooks from 18 different manufacturers with remarkable consistency- none of them work. We were careful to lift them from the water to only a brief moment.

Each fish was measured for length and girth for weight estimate. Our largest was estimated at 400 lbs. It was foul-hooked and escaped while being landed to the bank. The recent world record is pending from March 27th, 2015 by Rich Hart of 416 lbs. taken on fly at the nearby Rewa River. It eclipses the previous IGFA all-tackle record of 339 lbs. by Jakub Vagner. There are bigger fish here.



and big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest.” – Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

A twig snapped behind me, it was my brother, Mike.

“I bet I know what you’re thinking.”

“Huh?”

“You’re lookin’ at that river and thinking about *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. “No I’m not.”

“C’mon breakfast is ready.”

Some Amerindians arrived in this region 11,000 years ago. It was the domestication of the bitter root vegetable cassava, still produced by the villagers of Apoteri today that ultimately allowed the establishment of permanent agricultural communities. Technology blossomed with development of tools and so did art. The inhabitants of these riverbanks produced a wide variety of stone engravings, or Timerhri and rock paintings some of which may be viewed just upriver from our

camp.

Amerigo Vespucci, whom both western continents would be named for first sailed to this region in 1499. The first explorer to reach this far inland was Don Pedro Malaver da Silva. All of his expedition were slain by the war-like Caribe Indians save for the sole survivor Juan Martinez. He returned with two gourds of gold beads and a tale of discovering the city of Manoa which was built entirely of gold and precious stones and reigned over the its king El Dorado, “The Golden One.”

Spurred forward by the maniacal European lust for gold, many expeditions followed despite heavy losses to pugnacious Amerindians and pestilence. One of my favor-ite historical figures, Sir Walter Raleigh mounted an excursion to search for the golden city in 1594. He described his adventure in his book, *The Discoverie of the Large Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guyana*. The book was a hit in Europe. He made later voyages as did others, certain that he would





eventually find El Dorado and his golden city. But his knack and talent for putting beat downs on the Spanish cost him his head with a regime change on the English throne in 1618.

Apoteri's current 280 residents stem from aboriginals who drifted up from the Rio Branco and Rio Negro regions of Brazil at the beginning of the eighteenth century to avoid tribes involved in the slave trade there. Additionally they were pushed further by the Portuguese who tried to force them into mission settlements.

It would take the power of international economic forces to at last realize European settlement in Guyana: enter the Dutch West India Company. Still there were attacks by the Portuguese in Brazil, the English and the French, again from the Spanish; even and incursion from the Swedes [fake shudder] all trying to forge alliances with the Amerindians.

The prospect of fishing for

up to 40 different species in this river had filled my dreams for many nights leading up to this moment. However an opportunity so consecrated presented itself we would be drawn to portaging overland to "ponds" of water isolated by the dry season. We were targeting the largest scaled, fresh water fish on the planet-arapaima.

South America east of the Andes is more defined by its watersheds than any other region of the world. During the monsoon, waters rise and share species across watershed regions that are very separated during the dry season. There are at least 25 ponds separate from the river now which harbor captive populations of massive arapaima who predate on everything else that swims and successfully spawn there. Some, as small as a few acres contain dozens of the massive fish. I've known veterans of over 20 peacock bass trips all

over Brazil who have never got-ten a shot at one.

This is "King William Adventures," named for the nearby waterfall, it's the brain and heart child of International Game Fish Association representative, Steve Yatomi. Now 60 years of age, Steve has visited 81 countries; ferrying anglers into exotic destinations. At this point in life his interest has been refined to cutting edge locations and spending more time away from his home in California and "off the grid." He saw the potential here on a scouting visit.

His vision is a self-sustaining ecologically sound fishing project aiming at two goals. The first is job creation for the local Macushi and Wapishana Amerindians from Apoteri. The youths are leaving for distant jobs in the city and gold mines and the loss of their culture is at risk. Secondly is the preservation of the arapaima.

A particularly articulate

spokesman for arapaima conservation was village chief, Campbell James. He had worked closely with English biologist Graham Watkins, previously with IWOKRAMA, Guyana's International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development and American Leandro Castello of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. They had studied the Brazilian model in 2001 of harvesting over 30% of large adult arapaima caught and sparing juveniles. Over a very few years not only did the number of fish decline dramatically but the size of the fish fell sharply. The approach was a clear failure.

When Campbell returned and began fish counts in earnest, there were about 450 arapaima in the Rupununi district. On the last formal count three years ago, it had risen to 5,000. Size has also increased. Only indigenous people may harvest one, but there have been poachers.

The fish's problem is that it is simply delicious. I've dined on it years past at some of the best restaurants in Brazil. There were stacks of them like cord wood at the market in Manaus. They have exported for farming to numerous countries in Southeast Asia and South America. There is a current study for their viability in South Florida's aquaculture.

Some regions of Brazil have become closed secondary to over fishing. The Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora [CITES] has listed Arapaima species as endangered. The future may find fishermen at Brazilian fish farms instead of wild habitat. In Guyana there is no current market for their flesh. For wild arapaima, this may be the numero uno hotspot on the planet.

On my previous visits to Amazonia I've been impressed with the industriousness of the native fishing guides, clearing paths for our boats with their machetes through brush choked back waters...this was child's play. Our guides carried our boats, coolers, gear and tackle straight up 50 foot vertical banks and through a half mile of forest twice-a-day. Scaling these walls with barefooted effortlessness, they then had a hand on each of us like human crutches to prevent what would most certainly have been a series of meaty thuds echoing up from the bottoms below.

I have never met a more poised and considerate group of people than along this river. They reminded me somewhat of the Thais, whom I admire so much. "Amerindians" harshly clangs with the tone of misguided modern political correctness. The names of





their peoples, the Wapishana, Macushi, Caribes, Manoa, Patamonas, Akawois and Wais-Wais sound more like poetry. They are wonderful story tellers. They describe themselves as Christians, but it did not take long for their tales at night to turn to the spirits they call *Durimas*. They play central roles in conquering adversaries in historic battles when demons could be summoned to protect a village and enemies compelled to the river from their canoes to perish from monstrous fish and crocodilians. Although there are two Christian churches in the village, they still consult their Piaiman or shaman on important matters. The forest, the river, the air around them are filled with incredible things.

Another important belief is in *Binas*, or charms. A good example is reciting the five correct charmed words and then blowing on a cut to stop dangerous bleeding.

. Eating certain peppers by the river can change the weather. Another is for a young man to carry leaves from a special plant in his pocket with the result of women finding him irresistible. Some will be tucked in my skivvies tonight...we'll see.

I remember the moonless night when we went out in the boats hunting with Campbell James and the men, not returning until the wee hours of the morning. We shot fish with the short, blunt native bows and iron tipped arrows. Remarkably they have archery competitions at over 100 meters with these things. Countless pairs of eyes, illuminated by our flashlights stared back from amongst great pachyderms of stone along the river. Some of the eye-things walked, some crawled, some flew and some...just waited. Under the brilliant Van Gough swirl of overhead constellations, it would be so easy to give one's self over to this world of spirits and myth. The eyes of Duri-



mas? Perhaps of the ghosts of the gold seekers, come from their distant lands, whose dust was destined to remain here and whose water fated to flow back down this river, whispering with their last breaths, “Where are you El Dorado?”

“It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing.”  
-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

Last night in the capital, Georgetown...a time to celebrate, every one of us had landed a trophy arapaima and released it safely. We'd caught a lot of other fish in the river and ponds. There is a fantastic population of Eastern Indians here who began migration from the subcontinent as indentured servants in the 1840's subsequent to abolishing slavery via the Emancipation Act of 1833. That's three decades before the U.S. It was a huge feast of Indian curry at the Maharaja Palace and the bartender was kept on his toes.

The pride of civilization in Georgetown is their rum producer Demerara, touted as the best on the planet. The dramatis personae on Demerara's all-star list was led by...El Dorado.

Twenty one years aged in the cask, its bouquet was ethereal as it glistened like gold in the lamp light - “Ah, there you are El Dorado, we've been looking for you.”

My brother peered over his glass. “I know what you're thinking. The legend of El...”

“No I'm not.”