

Mawuusa and the Giant Anteater

*Experiences, beliefs and research
from the South Rupununi, Guyana*

Credit

This book is part of a series of books produced by the South Rupununi Conservation Society (SRCS) that is intended to educate people about the wildlife of the Rupununi.

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This book was researched and printed with support from:

The GEF Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP), implemented by UNDP



The Sustainable Wildlife Management Programme in Guyana.

The SWM Programme is an initiative of the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), which is funded by the European Union with co-funding from the French Facility for Global Environment and the French Development Agency. It is implemented through a consortium partnership, which includes the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).



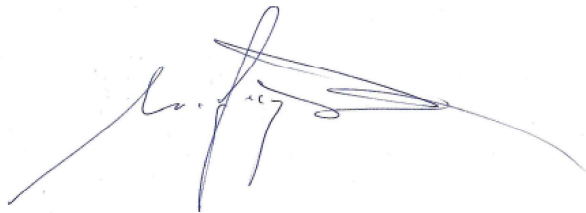
Foreword

The Rupununi is home to one of the most unique animals: the giant anteater. This poorly known mammal is threatened by extinction, and we risk losing it forever before we even understand its role in the ecosystem. This is why initiatives like those of the South Rupununi Conservation Society (SRCS) are so important: saving species from extinction requires us to work together, to raise awareness, and to share our experiences.

I applaud the SRCS's efforts to study giant anteaters in the Rupununi, raise awareness about these fascinating creatures, as well as transmit traditional knowledge about them to future generations. All these actions will help save giant anteaters – and many more species that coexist with the tamanawaa.

The community – including you, dear reader! – plays a fundamental role in safeguarding nature. I invite you to join the SRCS in their conservation efforts as keepers of the tamanawaa. How can you help? Follow the Katoonarib giant anteater community conservation zone village rules, which you will find at the end of this wonderful book. If you see a giant anteater, don't bother it – simply enjoy watching it. Share your observations with the rangers, and tell your friends about these amazing creatures. And, most importantly, be proud of living in the “Land of Giants”, an incredibly beautiful environment, and contributing to its conservation.

This book will no doubt help awaken your curiosity and love for the incredible creatures that surround you. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do!



Mariella Superina
Chair, IUCN SSC Anteater, Sloth
and Armadillo Specialist Group



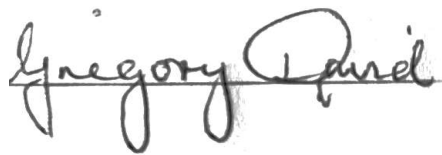
Introduction

Katoonarib is a Wapishana Village in the very centre of the South Rupununi. In 2019, we began to work with the SRCS to research the giant anteaters living here. Since then, our rangers have used camera traps and tracking techniques to identify more than 30 individual anteaters living in village lands, and they have made new discoveries about this amazing species.

As we learn more about our wildlife, we understand how easy it is for people to destroy them. We learn that all over South America, giant anteater numbers are decreasing. We learn that because they reproduce slowly, the death of just a few females can threaten the survival of that population.

We can also understand better the value of anteaters as beautiful creatures in our savannahs that help us by eating the ants that destroy our farms. We understand that we don't need to be afraid of anteaters – if we don't trouble them, they will not trouble us. We must care for anteaters for our future generations.

In 2020, the people of Katoonarib Village set up a Giant Anteater Community Conservation Zone. Now, we protect giant anteaters in our land. We hope those who read this book will be inspired to set up their own conservation zones for giant anteaters and other species.



Gregory David
Toshao, Katoonarib Village
South Rupununi



South Rupununi Conservation Society

We are farmers, hunters, school children, business people, tour operators, teachers, tour guides and more. We are the women, men and children who call the Rupununi our home.

Over the years, we have seen a decline in the number of animals and plants of the Rupununi region as well as continued degradation of the natural environment. Through education, research and conservation we are dedicated to sustaining and protecting the wildlife of our home.

Our focus currently includes:

- Red Siskin Conservation;
- Giant Anteater Research and Conservation;
- Yellow-spotted River Turtle Monitoring and Research;
- Environmental Education;
- Traditional Knowledge Preservation;
- Monitoring the impact of Fire on Wildlife;
- Conservation of the Hoary-throated Spinetail and the Rio Branco Antbird.

To find out more, contact us via email at srcs.rupununi@gmail.com, view our website www.srcs-gy.com, or find us on Facebook and Instagram.

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*SRCS and Katoonarib Community Members celebrating the launch of the
Katoonarib Giant Anteater Community Conservation Zone*

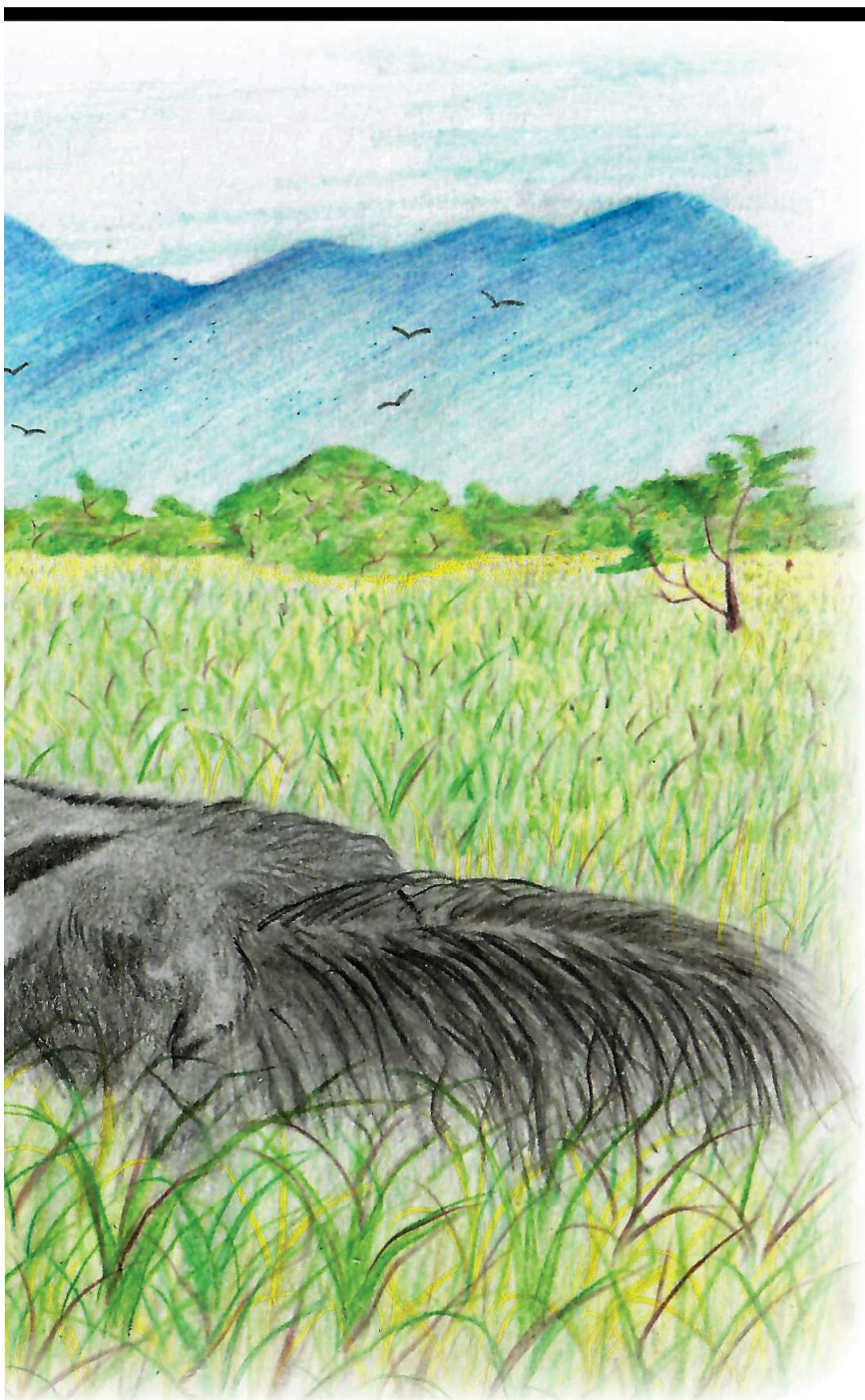
Mawuusa Meets a Tamanawaa



Mawuusa and her father were on their way to the farm. It was early morning and the dew sparkled on the leaves.

In the distance Mawuusa saw a humped black shape moving slowly through the long grass.

“ŌDaru, look!” she whispered to her father. “Tamanawaa!”



“You want to see her more close?” he asked. “Don’t be frighten. If you do not trouble the tamanawaa, then she will not trouble you. Watch how we can get close to her without her knowing.”

ODaru showed Mawuusa how to feel the breeze on her face and get downwind of the anteater so it would not smell her.

“Tamanawaa can smell everything, but they do not hear or see well,” he explained.

They walked slowly and quietly. They kept low in the grass.

The anteater was very close now and they could see that on her back was a young one with markings just like hers.

The mother anteater was feeding on a big termite nest. Every now and then she stretched out her nose to sniff the air. Then she dug into the nest with her claws and pushed in her long snout. As she drew her snout out of the nest there was a flash of a long dark tongue, swarming with termites.

The little one clung on to her back, fast asleep.

Mawuusa felt excited and afraid. The animals were so beautiful, strong and quiet. In that instant, she decided she would find out more about giant anteaters.





Types of Tamanawaa

In the evening, Mawuusa's uncle came to the house.

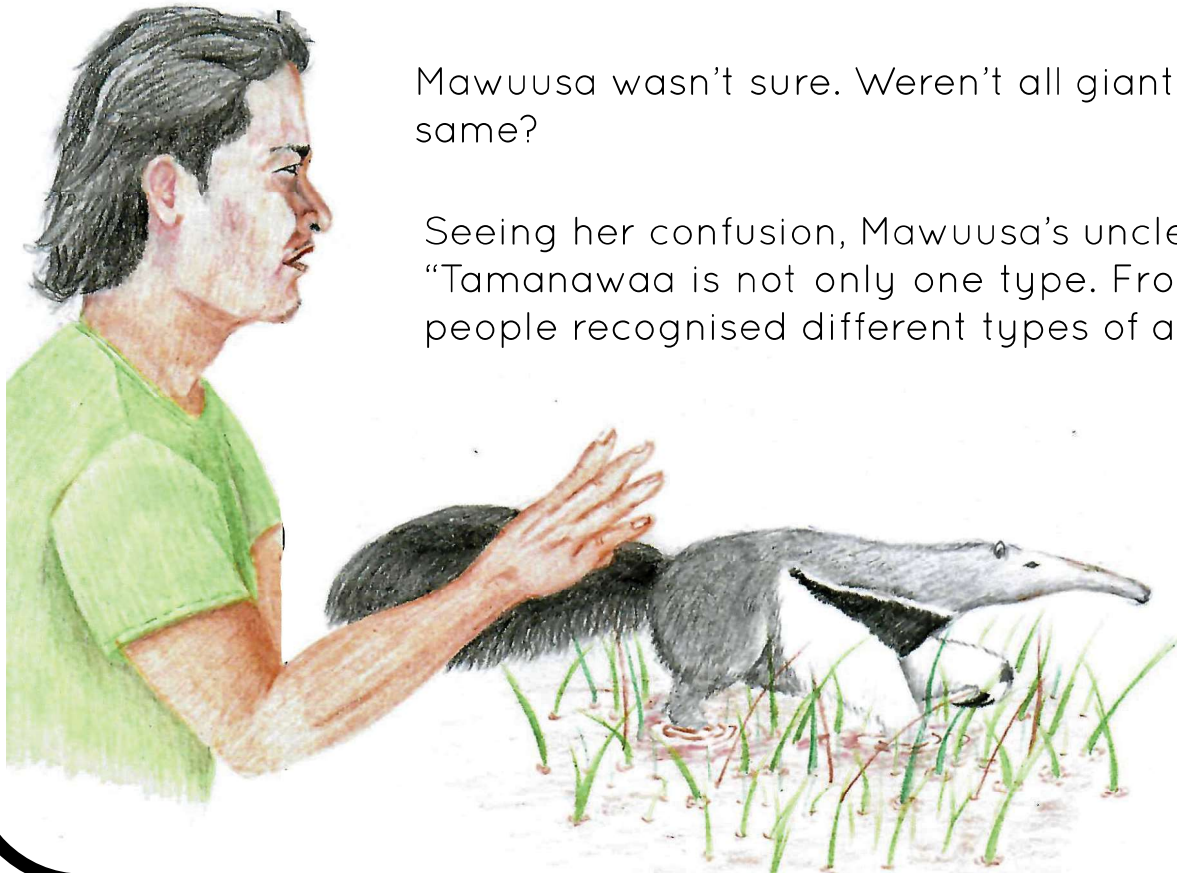
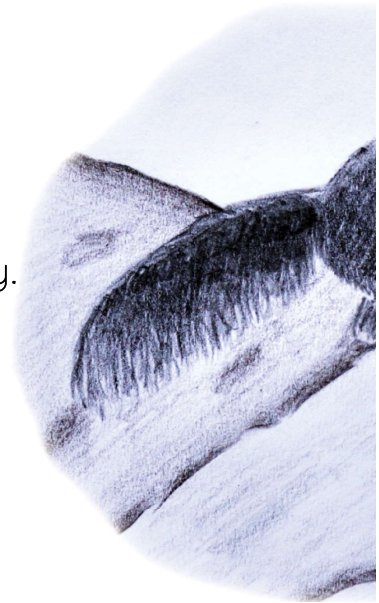
"ÕDaru and I saw a tamanawaa today!" she told her uncle proudly. "She had a baby with her. We got close enough to see her tongue!"

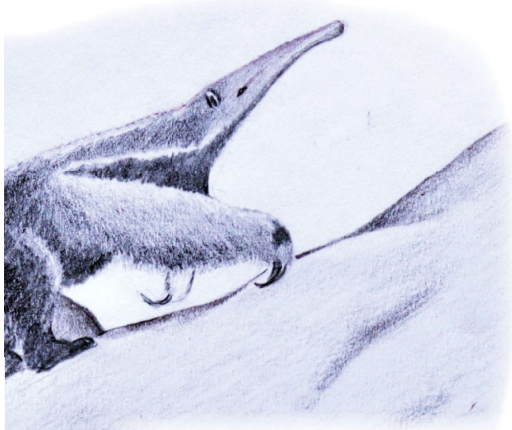
"A savannah tamanawaa?" asked Uncle.

Mawuusa wasn't sure. Weren't all giant anteaters the same?

Seeing her confusion, Mawuusa's uncle explained, "Tamanawaa is not only one type. From long ago, our people recognised different types of anteaters here.

"There is the tamanawaa of the swamp. It is small and greyish.





“The tamanawaa of the mountain is big and very dark.”



“The tamanawaa of the ité bush is big like the mountain one but shiny black.”



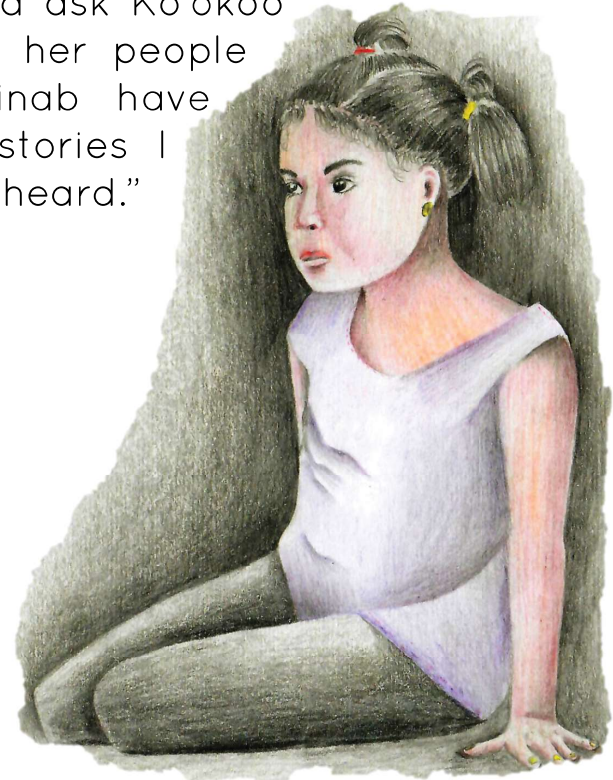
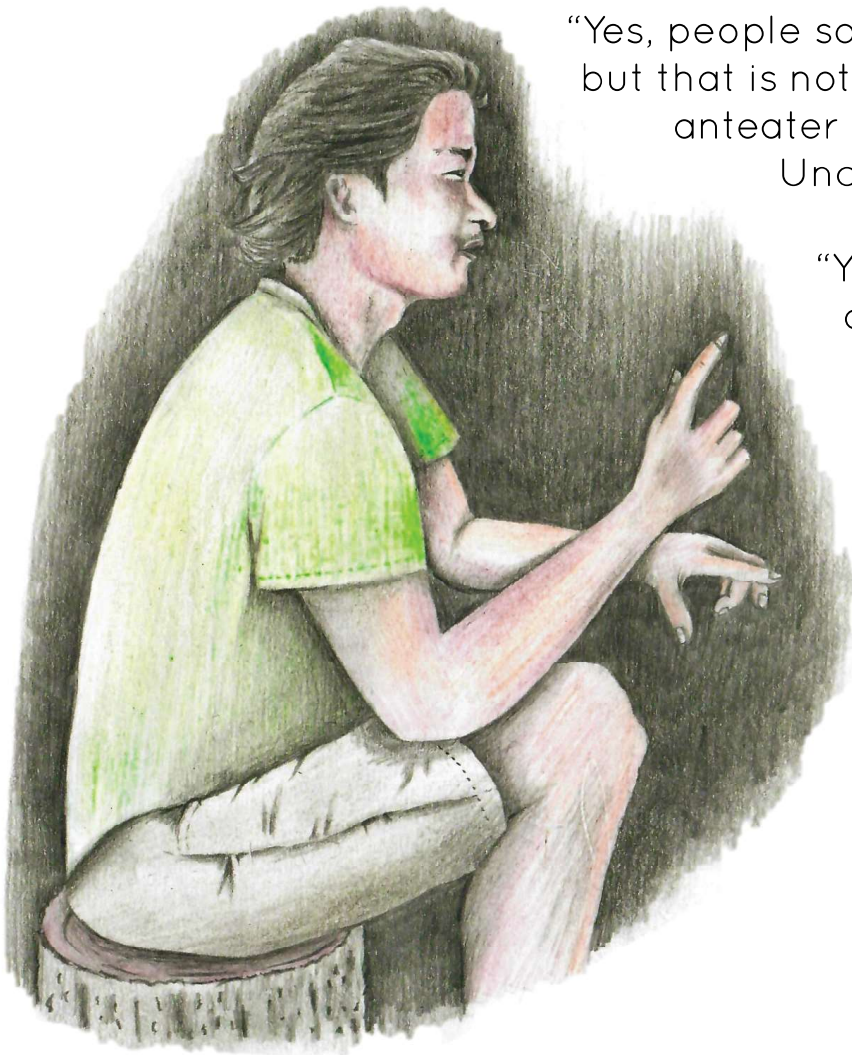
“But the savannah tamanawaa is different. Although it is big, it’s not all that black. That is probably the one you saw.”

“We say the tamanawaa are keepers of the swamp, the mountain, the ité bush and the savannah.”

“And what about the water tamanawaa that people talk about?”
asked Mawuusa shyly.

“Yes, people say it also has the water anteater,
but that is not the tamanawaa. It is a different
anteater we call *Paashim*,” explained
Uncle.

“You should ask Ko’okoo
about it; her people
in Shulinab have
some stories I
never heard.”

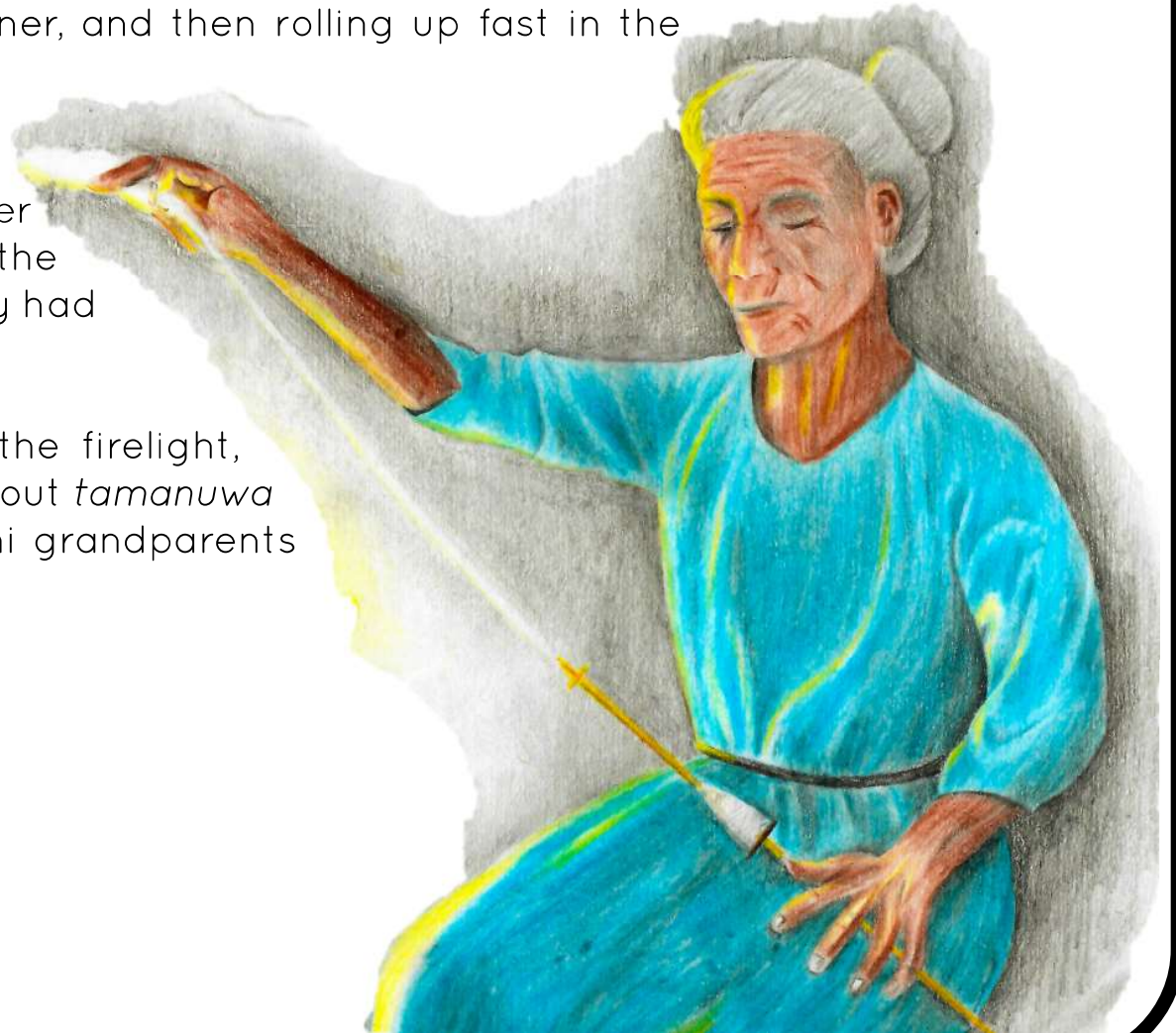


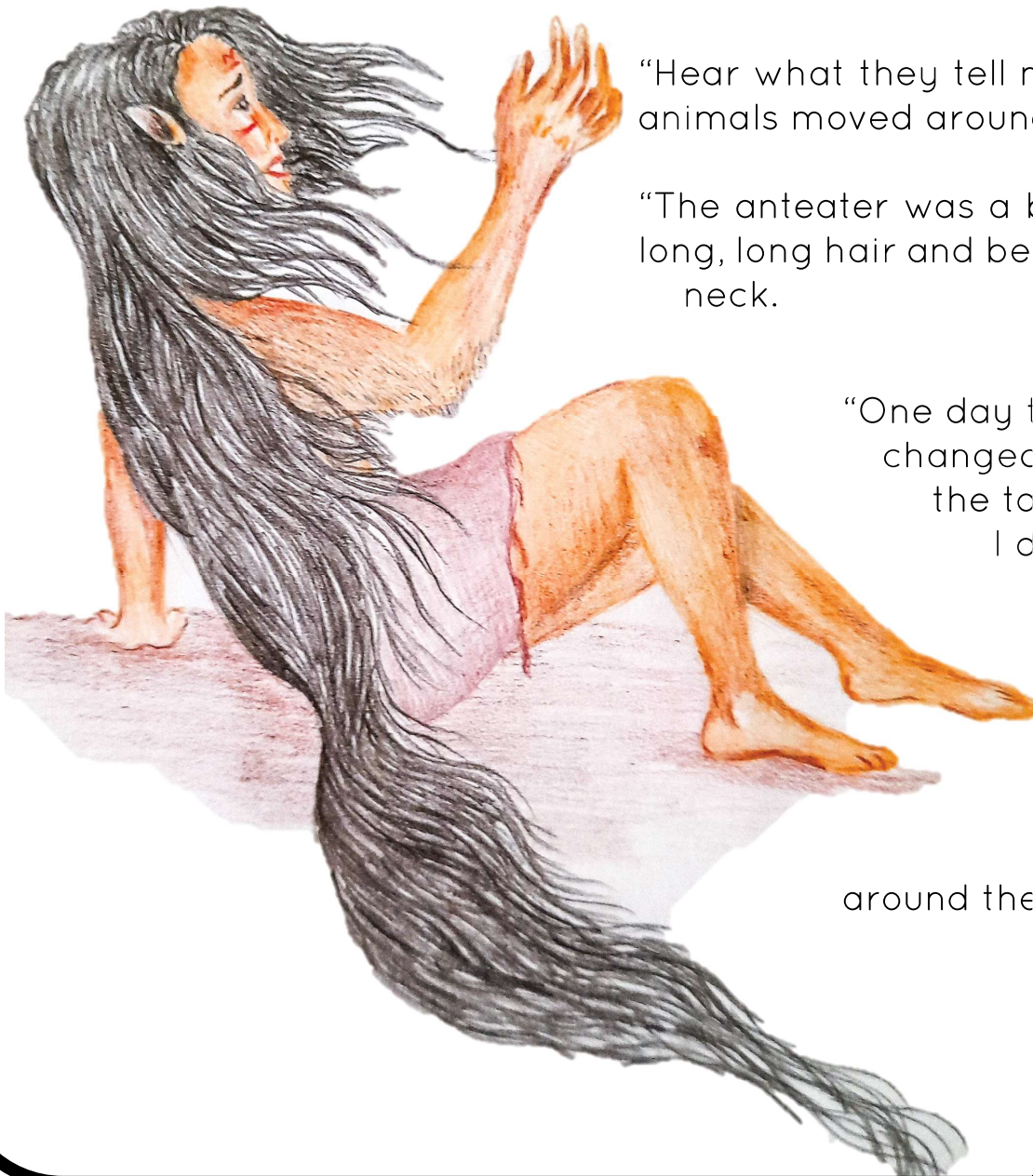
Ko'okoo Spins Her Tales

In the yard, ODaru roasted fish over a low fire. Ko'okoo sat nearby, spinning cotton in preparation for weaving a new hammock. The spindle whirled over her thigh, the line of cotton in her raised hand getting longer, thinner, and then rolling up fast in the spindle.

Mawuusa told her Ko'okoo about the giant anteaters they had seen that day.

Ko'okoo smiled in the firelight, "All I can tell you about *tamanuwa* is what my Macushi grandparents told me," she said.

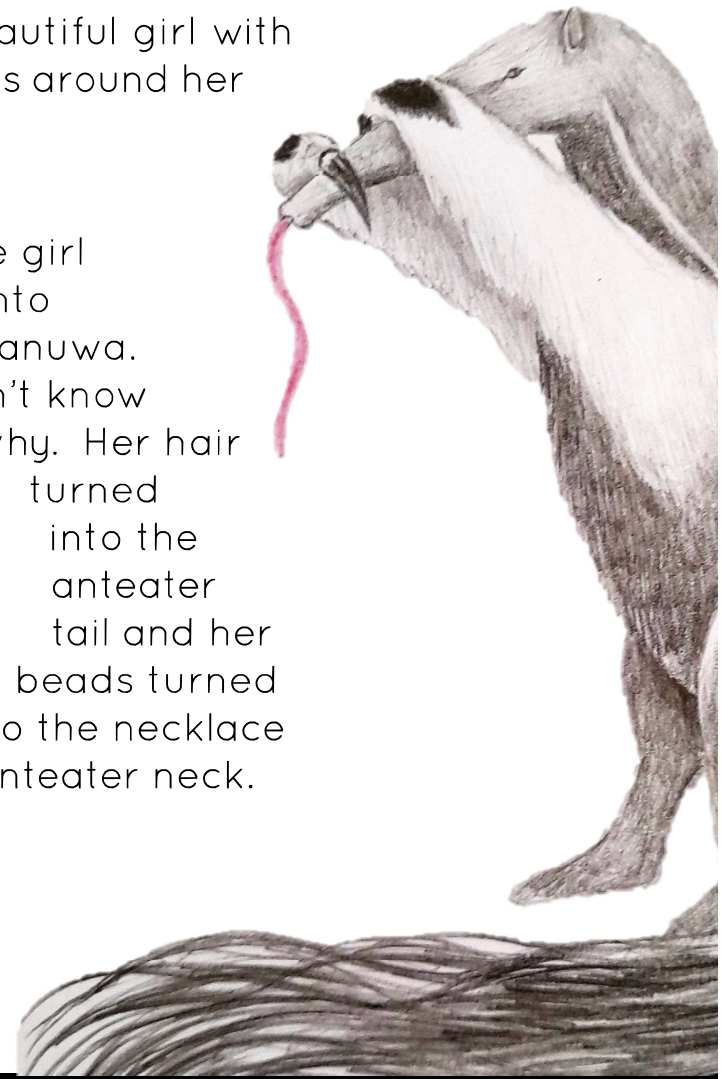




“Hear what they tell me: there was a time when animals moved around the world like people.

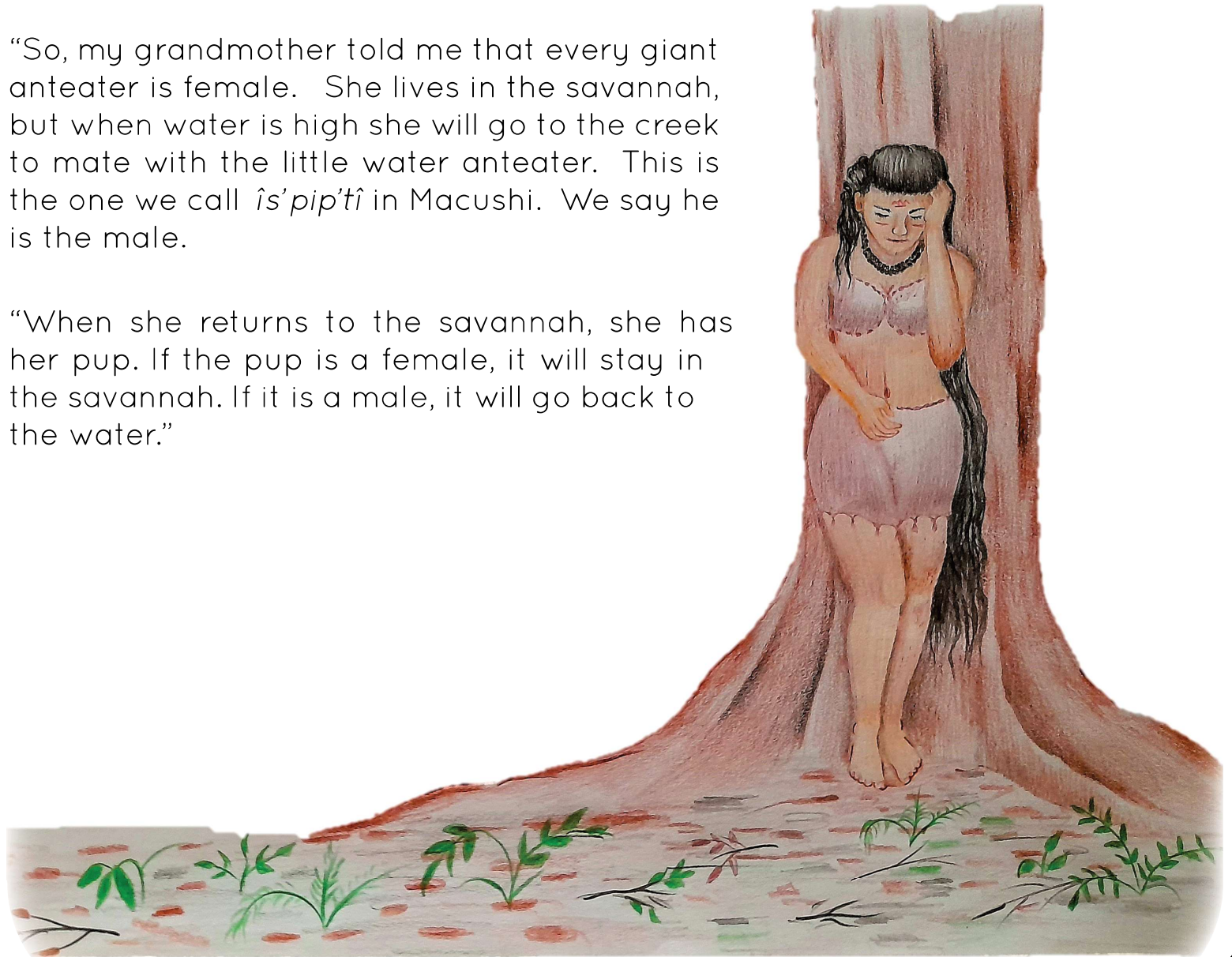
“The anteater was a beautiful girl with long, long hair and beads around her neck.

“One day the girl changed into the tamanuwa. I don’t know why. Her hair turned into the anteater tail and her beads turned into the necklace around the anteater neck.



“So, my grandmother told me that every giant anteater is female. She lives in the savannah, but when water is high she will go to the creek to mate with the little water anteater. This is the one we call *îs'pip'tî* in Macushi. We say he is the male.

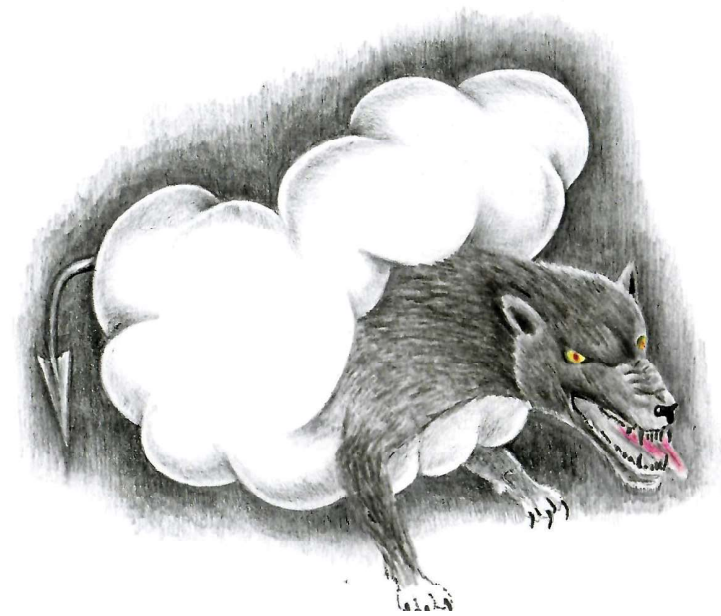
“When she returns to the savannah, she has her pup. If the pup is a female, it will stay in the savannah. If it is a male, it will go back to the water.”



ODaru stopped roasting and sat down with them. “Not everyone thinks this, Mawuusa,” he explained. “I have seen the male tamanawaa running after the female in the savannah. I even saw them mating once.”

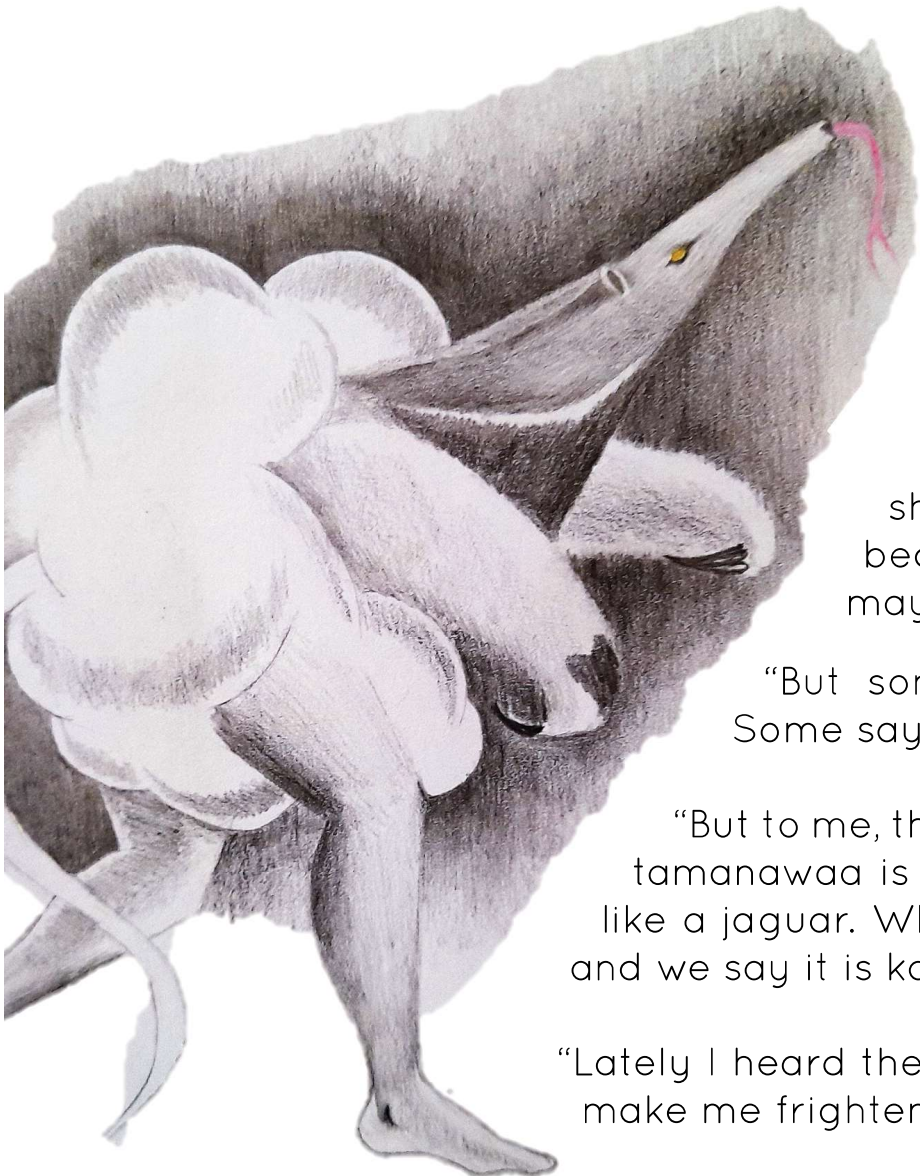
Ko’okoo only smiled and continued her story.

“We Macushi also have the belief about *Wini’rîpi*...” she said.



“...*Wini’rîpi* is a kind of a spirit that can transform into all kind of creatures: dog, cat, monkey, and yes, anteater.”





Mawuusa was horrified!

“But what *is* tamanawaa?” she asked,
“Is it good or is it bad?”

ODaru had a reply, “Tamanawaa is an animal, just like other animals. Mostly she is quiet. Sometimes she gets cross because she wants to protect her baby, or maybe she wants to mate.

“But some Wapichan are afraid of anteater. Some say anteater is *kasaraiwei*.

“But to me, they are just confused because when the tamanawaa is in heat the female makes a big noise, like a jaguar. When we hear the noise we get frighten and we say it is kasaraiwei.

“Lately I heard them making noise like this at my farm. It make me frighten. But it wasn’t kasaraiwei.”

Remedy for Acouchí Ants

Mawuusa was confused; the stories filled her head like visions.

As she was preparing to sleep, she asked her father, “ŌDaru, which story is true?”

ŌDaru took some moments to answer her, and when he did, it was in the form of another story.



“Long time ago, it was not like today. The grandparents knew many things, but some things they didn’t know yet.

“They used to see that when they made their farm there was a pest called *koki*, and they had no way to get rid of it.

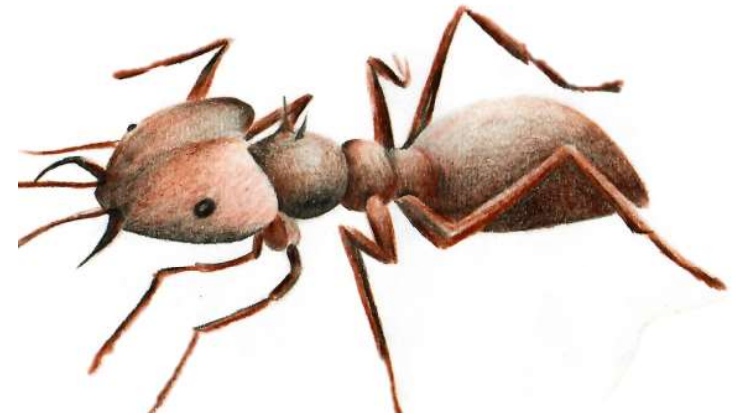


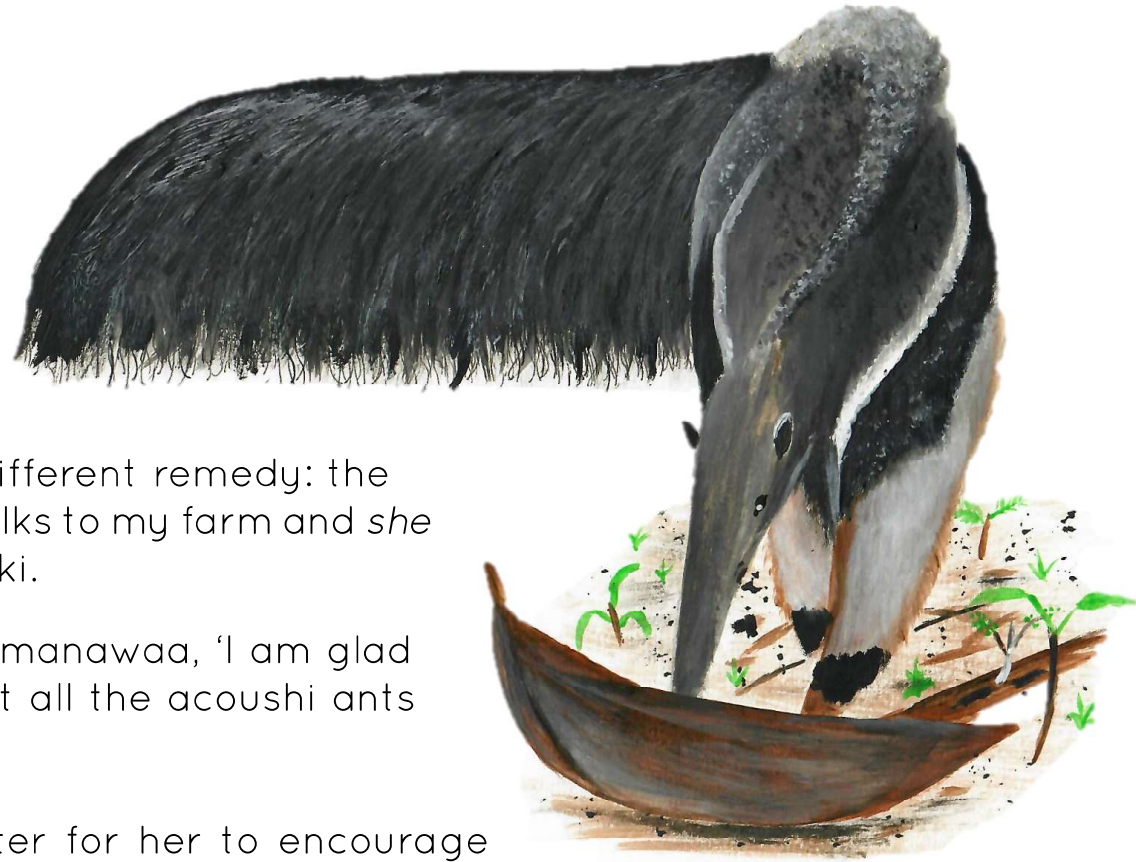
“But they saw the tamanawaa and believed it was the medicine for the *koki*.

“So they killed the tamanawaa and cut up the flesh into many little pieces. Then they pushed the little pieces into the holes of the *koki* nests and blocked up all the holes with tamanawaa flesh.”

“Did it work?” asked Mawuusa, “Did the tamanawaa eat up all the ants?”

“How the poor tamanawaa could eat the ants?” ODaru exclaimed, “It was dead!”





“No, I have a different remedy: the tamanawaa walks to my farm and *she* eats out the koki.

“So I tell the tamanawaa, ‘I am glad that you kill out all the acoushi ants from me’.

“I even set water for her to encourage her to come to my farm. That is why I do not harm her when she comes to my home and my farm.

“The *living* anteaters are my medicines so I do not think about harming them. And so my crops are healthy because the tamanawaa helps me finish out all the koki and I don’t even need to buy ants poison.

“What I mean is this: all the stories are true in important ways. We can’t forget our past. But times change. The world is different now and we must think about the future as well.

“Mawuusa, your uncle says the tamanawaa are the keepers of the savannah, the mountains and the rivers. Well, I say that we are the keepers of the tamanawaa.

“You can find out what is important to you by listening to everyone and thinking for yourself. Keep asking your questions, Mawuusa.”



Paashim and the Fisherman

Mawuusa began asking about anteaters on her morning walk to school with Auntie Clara. Auntie Clara had been all over the Wapichan Wiizi as an SRDC monitor. Mawuusa admired her knowledge of people and places in the South Rupununi.

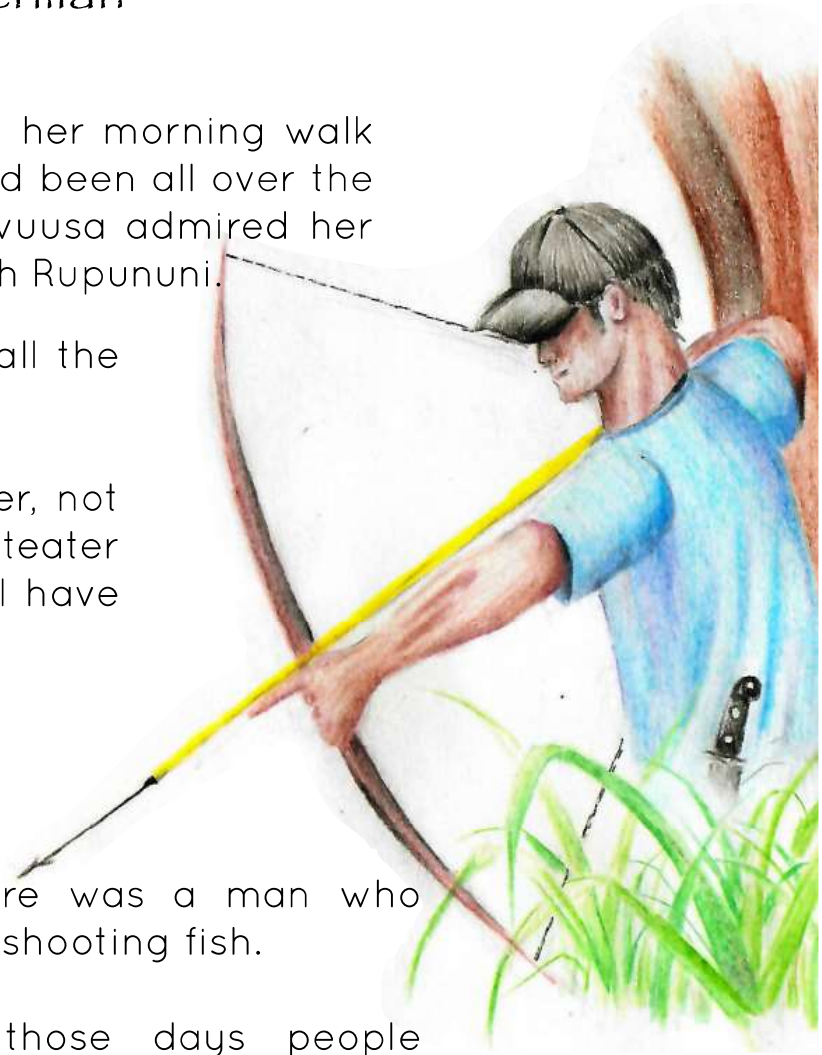
“Let me tell you a story I heard in nearly all the villages I walked in,” said Auntie.

“This story is about the little water anteater, not tamanawaa. Some people call this anteater *paashim*. Lots of people talk about it, but I have never seen it.



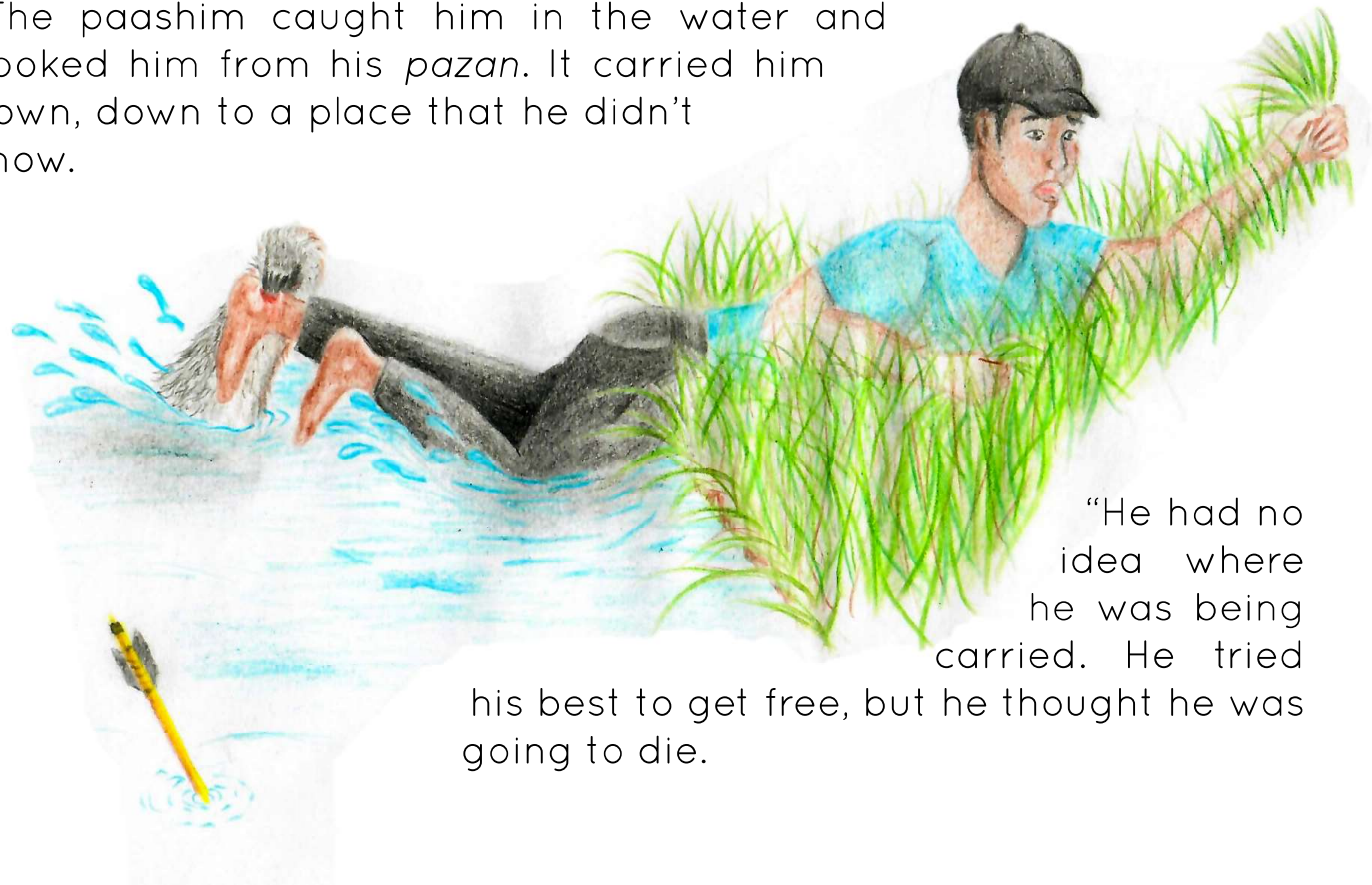
“There was a man who was shooting fish.

“In those days people were good archers; they didn’t like poisoning fish.



“He shot a *parizaba* and it swam away with his arrow. The *parizaba* was carrying his arrow along the creek so the man splashed through the water, trying to get hold of his arrow.

“The *paashim* caught him in the water and hooked him from his *pazan*. It carried him down, down to a place that he didn’t know.



“He had no idea where he was being carried. He tried

his best to get free, but he thought he was going to die.

“Eventually he came out to another place. The paashim put him in a cave, with a sheet of rock under him and rock and earth all around him. He was left there and the paashim went away. Maybe he was going to tell his masters, the jaguars, that there was a person brought down there.

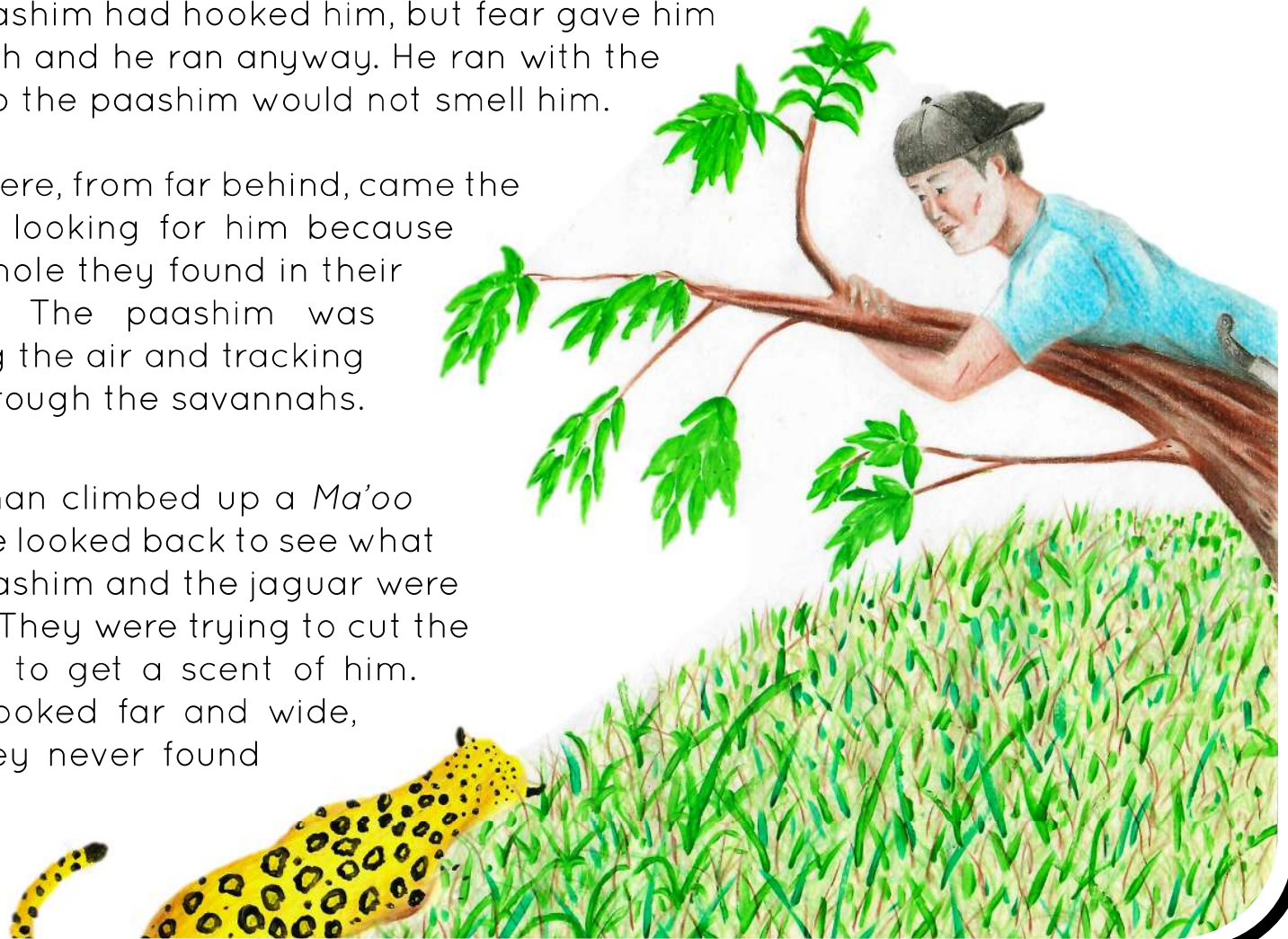
“So the man was left alone, wondering what to do. Just then he barely heard a *shizori* whistling somewhere above him. Excited, he drew out his knife, and hit the ground over his head. When he hit it, it made a hollow noise ‘*din din*’ – the roof of the cave was thin!



“He started to dig over his head, and eventually bored through the roof. He managed to come out and as soon as he did, he started to run. Of course, he had a big hole in his ankle where the paashim had hooked him, but fear gave him strength and he ran anyway. He ran with the wind so the paashim would not smell him.

“And there, from far behind, came the jaguar, looking for him because of the hole they found in their cave. The paashim was sniffing the air and tracking him through the savannahs.

“The man climbed up a *Ma’oo* tree. He looked back to see what the paashim and the jaguar were doing. They were trying to cut the breeze to get a scent of him. They looked far and wide, but they never found him.”



Arriving in the village centre, Mawuusa asked, "I have heard that paashim is the tiny little anteater that lives in trees - is it the same one?" asked Mawuusa.

"I think you mean what some people call *tabiru*: the Pygmy or Silky Anteater that lives in high trees in the deep forest. Tabiru is a different anteater: rare and very special."



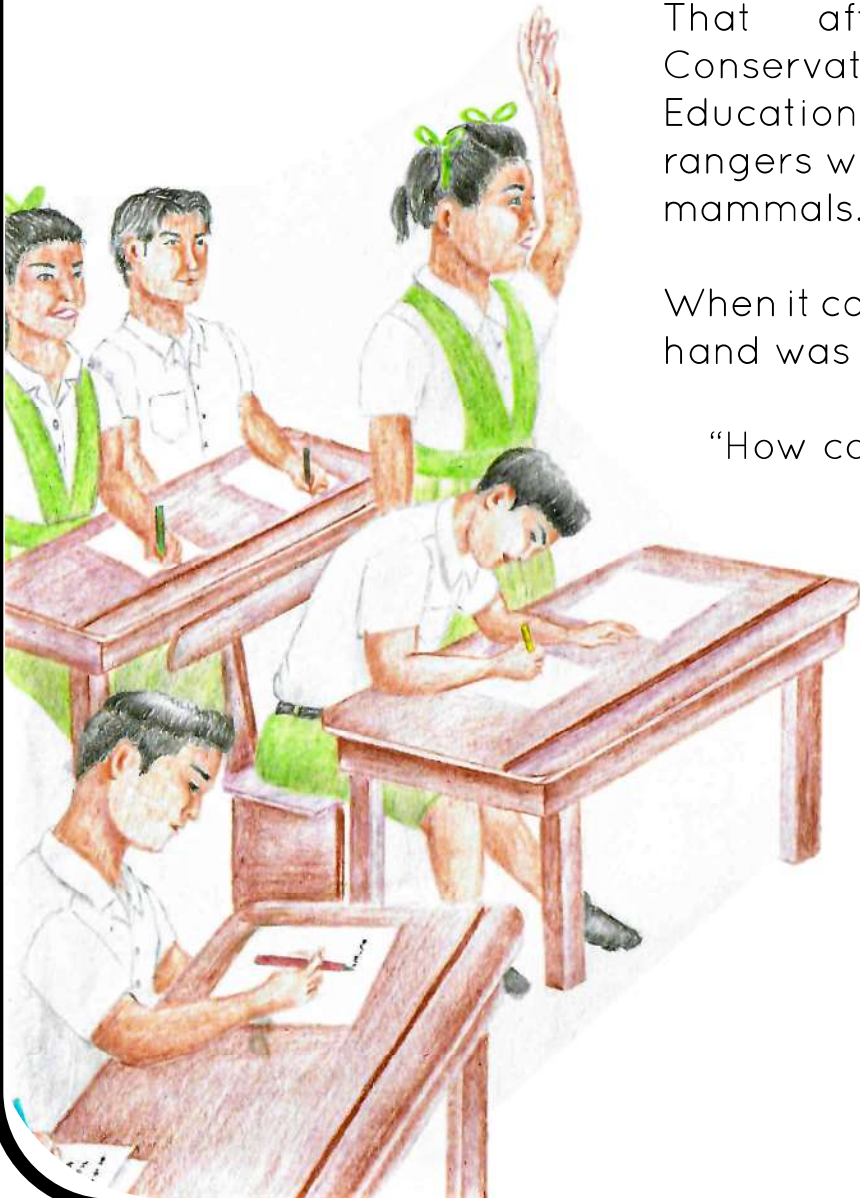
Environmental Education Class

That afternoon, the South Rupununi Conservation Society held Environmental Education classes at school. One of the SRCS rangers was there to talk to the children about mammals.

When it came time to ask questions, Mawuusa's hand was the first to go up.

"How can you tell the male from the female tamanawaa?" she asked.

"Great question, Mawuusa!" replied Ranger Frank.



“It is almost impossible to tell the male from the female giant anteater. They both look the same. However, only the female carries the baby on her back.

“Biologists have even operated on anteaters to understand which is male and which is female. They find that the male’s testicles are hidden in the body so you can’t see them from outside.

“Any more questions?”

“I heard a tamanawaa is so strong it could kill a jaguar. Is that true?” asked Mawuusa.

“Giant Anteaters have very strong claws,” the Ranger replied, “If they are threatened, they will fight back. I think a jaguar would be very unwise to pick a fight with a giant anteater!





“But giant anteaters are not really dangerous if you leave them alone. If you are afraid of them, just move away, or go inside. They will pass and keep looking for their food.

“If you have more questions about giant anteaters, you can always ask one of the SRCS anteater rangers in the village. Then maybe you can make a poster and share it with the class next time.”

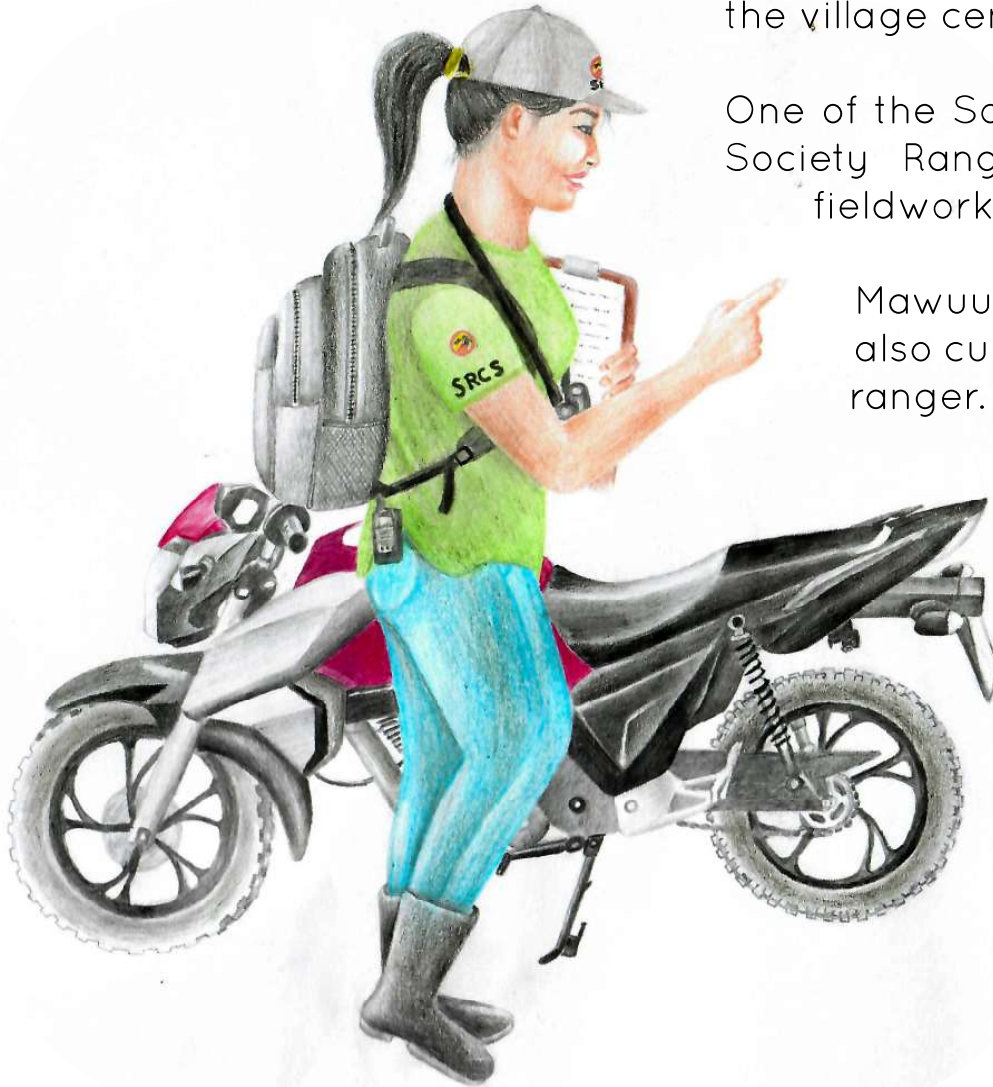
Mawuusa Learns from a Ranger

On her way home, Mawuusa stopped in the village centre.

One of the South Rupununi Conservation Society Rangers was coming in from fieldwork.

Mawuusa was nervous, but she was also curious enough to go up to the ranger.

“Excuse me,” she said, “I saw a giant anteater the other day, and I want to know more about them.”





“This is excellent! Where did you see the anteater?
What was it doing?”

The ranger took notes as Mawuusa explained how they had seen the mother anteater with her young one, eating termites near their farm.

The Ranger rummaged in her bag for her phone. “Can you remember what she looked like?” she asked.

“Did she have a big spot on her front arms? Or just a little one up high? Did she have a mark on her nose, like this? What about the baby, was it this baby, do you think?”

The Ranger showed her pictures and pictures of anteaters, each one slightly different from the next.

“So they are not all the same?” Mawuusa asked excitedly, “My Uncle *told* me there are lots of different tamanawaa!”

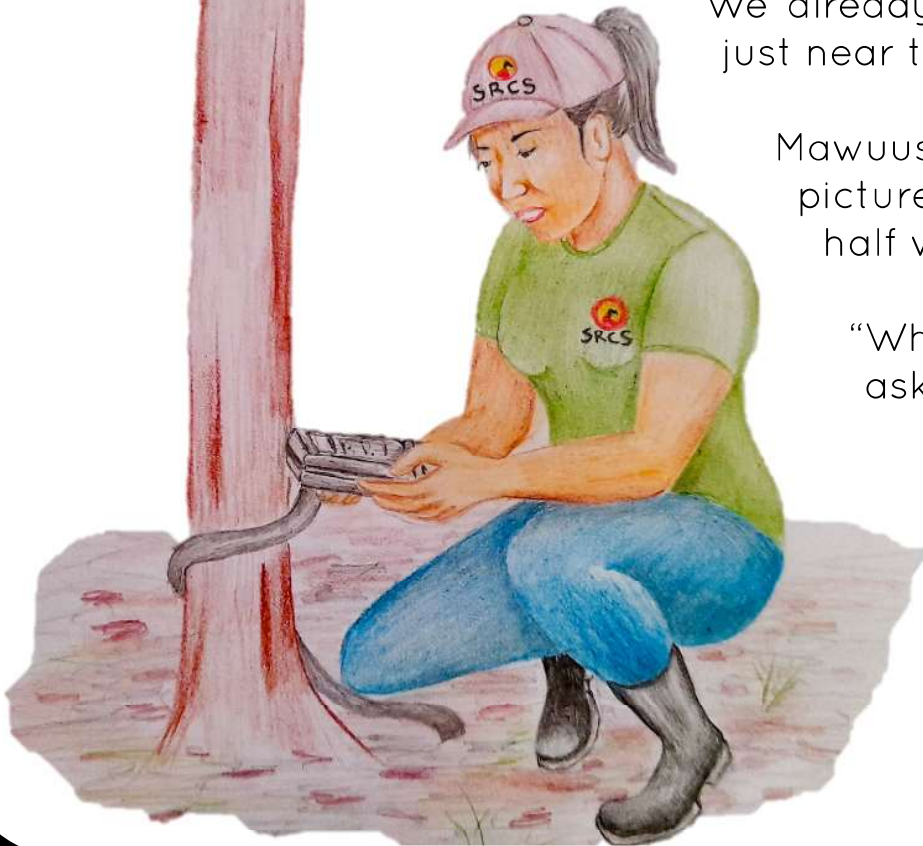
“Yes, each giant anteater looks a bit different,” the young Ranger replied.

“We are using sightings like yours, and hidden camera traps, to take pictures of anteaters. Then we learn what each one looks like, and we give them names and find out what territory they live in.

“We already recognise over 30 anteaters just near this village!”

Mawuusa looked at some of the pictures. In one, a giant anteater was half way up the trunk of a tree.

“What is that anteater doing?” she asked.





“This is what our camera traps have seen. No scientist had ever recorded this before, but people right in this village showed us - giant anteaters climbing and marking trees! We think they are communicating with each other using scratches and smells.”



“My friends say an anteater walking at night is something strange...” said Mawuusa. “...like *kanaima*.”

“They say that there is the real anteater, and then there is the *kanaima* dressed as *tamanawaa*. That is why my friends are afraid of anteaters during the night.

“...They say we should chase them away. Is it true?” Mawuusa asked.

“Well, I know a bit about *tamanawaa*,” replied the ranger. “You see, you could say that Giant Anteater is the elder of the savannah.

“Long before there were people, cattle, or even jaguars in South America, there were anteaters. We know because we have found the fossils of these anteaters from millions of years ago.

“But giant anteaters have always been fussy. They don’t like it to be too hot, and they don’t like it to be too cold.

“So here in Guyana where it is hot, the anteaters like to sleep in the day and come out in the evenings when it is cooler.

“They often look for food all night and into the morning.”

“So anteaters travelling at night isn’t something strange?” asked Mawuusa.

“No! They are just enjoying the cool air.”



The Ranger thought for a moment.

“And there is something else important too, Mawuusa. A giant anteater can only run for a short time before it falls down and can’t get up. Sometimes children can kill anteaters just by chasing them down and ‘playing’ with them. But this is not fun for the anteater!



“So please tell your mother that it is OK to shoo the anteater off your road or away from your house, but pity the anteater and don’t chase it down. You never know but you might kill it.”

“Giant anteaters are protected by law in Guyana. But why don’t you ask Toshao what more this village is doing to protect giant anteaters?”

“And here, take this home with you and study it. I bet your anteater is one of these ones – and then we will know she has a pup!”

The Ranger passed over some photos:



Which anteater did Mawuusa and her father see?

Katoonarib Giant Anteater Community Conservation Zone

Toshao was in his office. He was pleased to hear Mawuusa's questions. He took her outside to see the mural on the wall of the community centre:



“The Rupununi is a special place for anteaters and other animals,” explained Toshao. “Here there are no big cities, busy roads or huge farms that destroy their habitat. But at the same time, people still eat them, or kill them with fire, or kill them because we are afraid of them or think it is fun to hurt them.

“Anteaters are slow to reproduce; if we keep doing these things the anteaters will die out here, like they have in so many other places.

“But our grandparents taught us that all animals have value: they contribute in their own way. It is our role to care for them.

“In this village, we are proud to say that giant anteaters are protected.

“Look, we have our village rules that mean we cannot hurt giant anteaters, and we do not let people from outside kill them or take them away.”

KATOONARIB GIANT ANTEATER
COMMUNITY CONSERVATION ZONE
VILLAGE RULES

We do not allow:

- ~ Killing Giant Anteaters
- ~ Running down or Injuring
Giant Anteaters
- ~ Taking Baby Anteaters from
their Mothers
- ~ Selling or trading Giant
Anteaters

We Always:

- ~ Protect giant anteaters' habitats
by not burning when fire can destroy
bush islands or Swamps
- ~ Reduce Our Use of Ant Poisons
- ~ Know and Care for Our
Tamanawan

Mawuusa felt amazed by the stories she had heard. Each person she spoke to had given her a different insight into giant anteaters.

“Our tamanawaa are important, They are *amazing!*” she told ODaru that evening, “Our people came and found them right here. They are part of our Rupununi and they are worth caring for.

“But I also think I understand what you meant last night – the stories are part of our heritage too, just like the tamanawaa. They are worth researching and caring for too.

“I know now how to protect and be thankful for our anteaters. By learning about them, letting them go about their lives, and looking after the savannah and forest, we can be sure anteaters and other animals will always be around.”

Turn the page to see the collage Mawuusa made to display in her school. Can you make one for your class or home too?

WHY I LOVE YOU TAMANAWAA



Every Tamanawaa Looks Different

Scars on face & ears

Arm Marks are Different in Size

Bracelet

Length, Shape & Thickness of black & white Stripes

Protect You & Our homes

By eating 30,000 ants & Termites Every Day.



In many places you are dying out, But here we keep you safe.

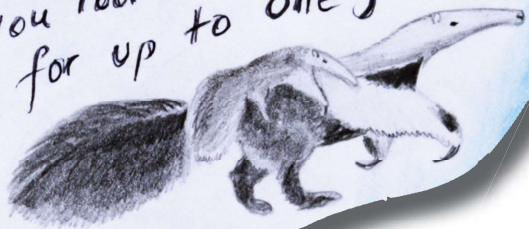




You love to live in
a mix of bush & Savannah

So our Rupununi is
your perfect home!

You will Only fight if you are
afraid and Cannot get away. If
we people dont trouble you, then
you will not trouble us.

You are great mothers
you look after your pup
for up to one year


★ Decorative animals like tamanawaa are protected by our Wapichan wiizi
Customary laws ★

Glossary of Wapichan (W), Macushi (M) and other words used in this book

ODaru / ŌDaru (W) *n: her father / my father*

Îs'pip'tî (M) *n: water anteater*

Ité *n: Mauritia flexuosa, a tall and beautiful palm tree.*

Kanaima *n: a term used in Guyana for a person using or manipulating demonic forces. They act on their own or on behalf of others seeking vengeance or other evil outcomes.*

Kasaraiwei (W) *n: a type of kanaima, known in Wapichan tradition to be a shape shifter and to scavenge the body of the person they killed.*

Ko'okoo (W) *n: grandmother*

Koki (W) *n: leafcutter ant; acouchi ant*

Ma'oo (W) *n: Sucuberry tree*

Mawuusa (W) (say: ma WUSS) *adj: beautiful.
n: teenage girl*

Paashim (W) *n: general word for anteater, also used for water anteater*

Parizaba (W) *n: lukunani, peacock bass. A tasty freshwater fish*

Pazan (W) *n: Achilles tendon*

Shizori (W) *n: Eastern Meadowlark (Sturnella magna), a common savannah songbird.*

SRDC *abbr.: South Rupununi District Council*

Tabiru (W) *n: Pygmy or Silky Anteater (Cyclopes spp)*

Tamanawaa (W) Tamanuwa (M)
n: giant anteater

Wapichan Wiizi (W) *n: Wapichan territory*

Wini'rîpi (M) *n: a shape-shifting person or spirit*



Jr Rudolph



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