

SAVANNA FIRES



During our stay on the Sipaliwini Savanna we met with fires regularly. We have seen them running along the hill sides and through the kawfoetoe valleys, crackling and fuming. Grasses and shrubs loose all their leaves, while tree trunks are left with a heavily scorched bark. Green turns into black.

Soon after the fire a remarkable recovery of the vegetation takes place. Low growing plants like *Bulbostylis spadicca* start flowering within 48 hours. Three weeks later the grass cover has been restored and most savanna treelets show fresh green leaves. In contrast, the forest border to the West of the savanna was obviously vulnerable to destruction by fire and seemed to be slowly retreating. Here shrubs like *Dioclea guianensis* were replacing forest trees.

These days the local Trio Indians can be held responsible for most of the fires. They gave us all kinds of reasons (easier walking and hunting etc.) for setting the savanna on fire, but at the same time their delight in just seeing the flames was revealing..

Fire-adaptations of the typical savanna plants however must have developed over a time span much longer than the Amerindian occupation of South America.



Blackened stumps of *Bulbostylis spadicea* after a recent fire



Retreating forest border, *Dioclea guianensis* in the foreground.



Traces of a recent fire, probably stopped by sudden rainfall, as seen from the top of the Morro Grande



MIND ON FIRE