

What is Happening to the Wildlife of South America

Report on a Journey by Philip K. Crowe

In 1964 Ambassador Philip K. Crowe, who is a member of the Board of the US section of the World Wildlife Fund, visited seven South American countries to survey the wildlife situation for the Fund. This article is compiled, with his kind permission, from the newsletters that he wrote on his journeys. All too often he found that if an animal is edible or useful it is shot. Even the guano birds of Peru have declined seriously with the discovery that it is more profitable to convert the fish on which they depend for food into fish meal. But there are some hopeful exceptions, notably in Venezuela. Chief among the problems in all the states is the enforcement of such protection laws as do exist, and the author sees in education the only hope for conservation in South America.

THE purpose of my mission was primarily to persuade the various governments to take more interest in wildlife conservation. Time for many of the rare forms of South America's wildlife seems to be running out rapidly.

With an area of 6,800,000 square miles, the continent is nearly twice the size of Europe, yet it is estimated that only 20 per cent is arable. Swamps and the vast mountain chain of the Andes, which stretches 4,400 miles from Venezuela on the sun-bathed Caribbean to freezing Tierra del Fuego on the South Pacific, make agriculture virtually impossible on four-fifths of the land. It is further estimated that a quarter of the cultivable land has been destroyed by erosion due to ruinous farming methods. The irrational clearing of forests has left the watersheds unprotected so that surface water has nothing to hold it. Indiscriminate killing of predatory birds and carnivores has led to a multiplication of crop-destroying insects and rodents. Despite its size, South America today is underpopulated. In England there are 350 persons to the square mile and in the USA 50, but in South America only 11. Even with the relatively small population the life of the average man is a hard one. Plagued by poverty, illiteracy, hunger and ill-health, his life expectancy is only 45 years against 70 in the USA.

Most of the national parks are not game sanctuaries in our sense. Those of the Argentine allow shooting and lumbering, while sizeable populations live in the so-called parks of Peru and Chile. The one park in Uruguay which could be called a game reserve is primarily a picnic area. In the whole vast Brazilian Amazon, there is not a single park though an island sanctuary is contemplated. The one bright exception to this rather grim picture is Venezuela, which in Rancho Grande has a functioning park, complete with wardens and effective conservation practices.

There are relatively few species of animals in South America which face extinction in the near future, but there are many which should be protected from now on. The chinchilla of the Peruvian, Bolivian and Chilean Andes is almost gone. Some are bred in captivity so that the species may not join the dodo, but the wild inhabitant of the high mountains may well become extinct. The vicuña is also partially guaranteed against oblivion by the presence of some large private herds, but unless the Peruvian Government goes ahead with its scheme to proclaim a reserve, hunting pressure by the inhabitants, mostly Indians, may well destroy the last of the wild herds. In the Amazon valley, the giant otter is now very rare and its pelt correspondingly expensive. Even one species of crocodile has been so systematically exterminated that the price of its belly skin has doubled in the past few years. The jaguar, third largest cat on earth, is being hunted out in many sections of the continent and does not enjoy protection in any country I visited.

Birds appear to be doing better than the earthbound creatures. There is not much meat on the small birds, and unless they have a market value, like the red siskin of Venezuela, they are left alone. The larger birds, whether edible or not, are often shot. The beautiful black-headed swan, whose flesh has the taste of a carpet, is often bagged through ignorance, but I found that most of the ducks, teal and geese were in good supply, perhaps because they have learned to be extremely wary of man.

VENEZUELA

The park system of Venezuela is the best I saw in South America. Under the able direction of Dr. Gonzalo Medina, an impressive job is being done to conserve the fauna of the mountain area. Since 1958, when the National Parks Board was set up to assist the Ministry of Agriculture, eight parks, three water reserve areas, and three national monuments, have been proclaimed. Venezuela has also ratified the 1948 Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation in the Western Hemisphere, and has sent delegates to all the important international conferences. The parks are carved from a vast, thinly settled country. Venezuela is larger than Great Britain, but its population of 8 million is about that of London; it has the smallest population per square mile of any country in Latin America. There are four well defined natural divisions: the Maracaibo lowlands, under whose swamps and waters lie 11 per cent of the world's proved oil reserves; the Andean ranges; the Llanos, or great plains of the Orinoco Basin; and the Guiana highlands, which cover about half the country. At least two more parks are needed—one in the Llanos or great plains and one in the Orinoco Valley.

Dr. Edgardo Mondolfi, executive director of the Consejo de Bienestar Rural, a civilian organisation that makes special studies for the government and private industry on all phases of land use and conservation, and his able assistant, Fernando Rondon, told me that deer shooting has just been stopped for two years, and that the capybara, a rodent about the size of a big pig, and the arrau, the river turtle, are also being given complete

protection; but the hunting and trapping of some other animals is unrestricted. The jaguar is hunted all year round and becoming rarer; the cattle interests fight any attempts to protect it. The puma is also hunted hard and becoming harder to find. The spectacled bear, due to the wild nature of the mountain terrain it inhabits and its extremely shy nature, is still extant but seldom seen. The lapa, which is a rodent smaller than the capybara, is still under pressure from hunters, while the tapir, anteater and armadillo are eaten by the country folk. Nor are the aquatic mammals safe. The manatee is fast disappearing from the Orinoco and its tributaries, and the eggs of the arrau, despite the law against taking them, are poached regularly. Crocodiles have no protection and are hunted hard for their skins.

There are no game wardens as such, but the National Guard, a quasi-military organisation stationed in the hinterlands, has responsibility for enforcement. Game watching, however, is only one of the many duties of the guardsmen and so does not necessarily get priority with all of the 10,000-man force, but there is a special 900-man division whose duties are entirely concerned with conservation and which operates under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture. There are three kinds of poachers: the small group of rich "sportsmen" who kill regularly for fun; the poachers who kill to sell the game, and the poor who kill to eat. The second group gives the most trouble.

The game laws need revision. The jaguar and puma should be put on the licence and a realistic price charged for permission to shoot. At present a game licence costs only about 15 cents. Enforcement of the game laws should be taken away from the National Guard and given to the Ministry of Agriculture which has responsibility for fauna and fish. Inland fishing should be licensed and more effort made to prevent poisoning and dynamiting fish. Conservation is a division of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Minister, His Excellency Dr. Miguel Rodriguez Visa, is keen about wild life and conservation in general. He had been in office only a few months but had already made history in the Department by setting up a new Game Department, devoted entirely to fauna, and by issuing the edict against the shooting of deer for two years.

BRAZIL

Conservation in the Amazon Valley has about as much significance as it had in the United States' West a hundred years ago. If an animal is edible or useful people shoot it. And the sad part of it is that despite the area's vast size, nearly that of the continental United States, the fauna, especially that with any economic value, is growing increasingly scarce. My enquiries at Belem at the mouth of the river; at Manaus, a thousand miles up; and all the way to the border of Peru, revealed that the prices of meat and hides are creeping steadily higher. A new French process for curing alligator and crocodile skins has increased the demand, and a factory now runs in Belem solely to process these reptiles. Even the manatee, whose flesh is pungent and whose hide sells for less than a dollar, is now seldom seen on the main rivers. In 1963, in Amazonas, the largest state in Brazil,

manatees, which are easy to find when the river is low and quite unable to take evasive action, were slaughtered in thousands when the river fell to a record low level, and their numbers may be permanently reduced. The hunters who do most of the killing are largely half-breeds and whites. The river turtle, which used to provide a staple diet for many of the inhabitants of the riverine towns, is now a luxury item. Puma and jaguar skins bring high prices and the hunters must push ever farther up the jungle streams to find them.

Burning of the forest, a really tragic policy when the trees destroyed are hundred-footers, goes on uninterrupted. We rode for some miles besides the blackened stumps of forest giants between which a scanty crop was growing. Actually, the soils of the Amazon Delta are poor and sandy, and nothing much can be produced without fertilisers which the peasants cannot afford. I was impressed with the government experimental farm where effective farming and soil conservation methods are taught. I learned, moreover, that Brazil's forest legislation is excellent with specific penalties for infractions of the laws, but that these are either not enforced or enforced so mildly that the disastrous cycle of "burn, sow, move and burn" is steadily consuming the remaining accessible forests. Of course, it will be a long time before a major dent is made in the vast Amazon jungles, but the forests near the growing cities are being relentlessly destroyed. Unfortunately I was not able to visit any of Brazil's four national parks as they are in the south-eastern part of the country. Seven more are in the process of formation.

PERU

Of the three Perus—the jungles, the mountains and the coast—we saw the first and last. Sixty per cent of the country is in the Amazon Valley but so far no game parks have been declared there, and conservation is just as foreign to this vast territory as it is to the Brazilian wilderness which it adjoins. There is no protection for any animal in the jungle territory of Peru, except one fish and crocodiles under one metre in length. At Iquitos and Pucallpa, the principal towns of the area, I ascertained that such game and fish laws as existed were unknown to most of the population. In fact most of the fish for sale in the local market had been killed by poisoning the rivers with barbasco (for which the penalty is two years in gaol—but no one is ever charged). Barbasco is a local herb which is so powerful it is used as a base for insecticides.

Virtually any skin, or for that matter live animal of the region, can be bought in Iquitos. The attitude is that since life is none too easy for humans why should they worry about animals, fish or birds. The argument that a valuable economic asset will soon vanish if action is not taken produces little reaction. Today there are still crocodiles to be killed for their skins and turtles to be eaten, so why worry about tomorrow?

Peru is not a signatory to the International Whaling Convention and makes no effort to spare the blue whales which are now an endangered

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