



Wildlife Goods for Tourists

Thomas O. Lemke

In Colombia, despite the protection laws, illegal trade in wildlife products, especially articles made from endangered species, continues in Colombia. The laws are adequate; the difficulty is enforcement. The author, a graduate student in ecology at Rutgers University, USA, describes what he found during a day spent visiting tourist shops where wildlife products were displayed for sale.

Villavicencio is a city of some 58,000 people in central Colombia. I moved there in January 1977 after 16 months doing wildlife surveys in two of Colombia's national parks—La Macarena and El Parque de la Cueva de los Guácharos—in order to write reports for INDERENA (Instituto de Desarrollo de los Recursos Naturales Renovables), Colombia's official conservation and natural resource agency. I soon noticed that several tourist shops, hotels, restaurants and side-street stands were openly selling illegal wildlife products, so on February 21, posing as a tourist, I went on a tour of the shops, made notes and photographed some of the goods.

Fiquelandia is the largest tourist shop in Villavicencio, specialising in native crafts, particularly items made from fique palm fibre. A glass case containing ocelot *Felis pardalis* skulls immediately drew my attention; they were selling for 260 pesos (US\$7). Other prohibited items for sale included a stuffed female Andean cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana* for 150 pesos (\$4); a basket of approximately 50 ocelot feet; skins of scarlet and red-and-green macaw *Ara macao* and *A. chloroptera* for 150 pesos (\$4) each; four large anaconda *Eunectes murinus* skins, 2.5 to 4 metres long, for between 200 and 250 pesos (\$5.50 and \$7); boa constrictor *Constrictor constrictor* skins 2 to 3 metres long; five whole-mounted Schneider's smooth-fronted caiman *Paleosuchus trigonatus* from 15 cm to 1 metre long; armadillo *Dasypus* and *Cabassous* shells; one kinkajou *Potos flavus* skin; four sets of deer *Odocoileus virginianus* antlers; a large assortment of gaudy necklaces made from parrot, toucan and tanager feathers; and more than 35 assorted turtle *Podocnemis* shells. The owner allowed me to photograph some of the items. He apologised for the lack of spotted-cat skins due to a tourist from Bogotá having recently bought his entire stock; he showed me a \$50 American traveller's cheque he had received for the items. He told me that animal skins were becoming harder to obtain because of conservation laws and enforcement by INDERENA.

Above: Horse saddles made from jaguar, cougar and anaconda skin; live ocelot on a jaguar saddle



Colombia's Illegal Trade

My next visit was to La Vaca Cagona leather shop near the town centre. The small room was full of leather articles made primarily from wild animal hides. The most striking were two beautiful horse saddles made from jaguar *Panthera onca* skin, the largest one selling for 50,000 pesos (\$1370). Three other expensive saddles were fashioned from mountain lion *Felis concolor* and anaconda skins. I also found a pistol holster and belt made from giant river otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* skin; handbags made from ocelot and jaguarundi *Felis yagouarundi* skins; anaconda shoes, belts, and lampshades; hats and handbags made of white-lipped peccary *Tayassu pecari*; two whole skins of collared anteater *Tamandua tetradactyla*, claws from a giant armadillo *Priodontes giganteus* and a foot from an Orinoco crocodile *Crocodylus intermedius*. The owner also kept a pet ocelot in the shop.

After lunch I visited San Andrecitas, a group of outdoor stalls known for cheap and black market goods near a busy town crossing; it is named after San Andreas Island, Colombia's duty free Caribbean Sea port. There I found a bizarre collection of animal parts for sale, including skulls of jaguar, ocelot, white-lipped peccary, and Brazilian tapir *Tapirus terrestris*; feet from jaguar, ocelot, mountain lion, tapir, armadillo, Orinoco crocodile and unidentified monkeys; ocelot tails, peccary teeth and ocelot claws. One jaguar skull was the largest I have ever seen, surpassing several museum specimens. Next I stopped at El Restaurante Morichal, three blocks from San Andrecitas, towards the town centre, which is known for its live bird display, often selling birds to interested customers. Their stock was low, but they did have one female Guianan cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola* for sale at 600 pesos (\$16). Other captive birds included magpie tanagers *Cissopis leveriana*, tropical mockingbirds *Mimus gilvus* and yellow-rumped caciques *Cacicus cela*. Poor lighting prevented photography. My final visit was to Villavicencio's largest and most modern tourist hotel, El Hotel del Llanos, on the road to the airport, where the gift shop had for sale one whole ocelot skin and various jewelry made from parrot, toucan and tanager feathers.

There are other establishments dealing in wildlife products in Villavicencio, but those I visited are the most frequented. Of the 25 species found for sale in some form, 13 are listed in the appendices of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), seven appear in the IUCN Red Data Book and six are on the US List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants.

Above: Jaguar saddle; Brazilian tapir skull; peccary and ocelot skulls, feet and teeth

As a result of my report INDERENA inspectors confiscated most of the illegal items and deposited them in their laboratory collection. Unfortunately the jaguar, mountain lion, and anaconda skin saddles were not confiscated but were marked and registered with INDERENA, and the establishment was given a citation not to produce similar articles in the future, upon penalty of confiscation.

Colombia's laws prohibiting the commercial exploitation of many wildlife species are adequate; in 1973 all hunting of jaguar, mountain lion, ocelot, margay *Felis wiedii*, little spotted cat *F. tigrina*, river otter *Lutra longicaudus* and giant river otter was banned. The problem lies in enforcement, which is difficult, often dangerous and highly susceptible to bribery. In this case INDERENA acted decisively, but people generally neither accept nor respect laws protecting natural resources, which are often misunderstood, poorly interpreted or completely unknown to the average citizen. INDERENA should be commended and encouraged to continue a strict enforcement policy.

Colombia has still not ratified the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Because of her rich fauna, including several endangered species, and the country's alleged dedication to conservation principles, it is vitally important that this should be done. Letters of encouragement can be addressed to Presidente Alfonso Lopez-Michelson, Palacio de San Carlos, Bogotá, Colombia and to Dr Julio Carrizosa, Gerente General, INDERENA, Cr. 14 #25A-66, Bogotá, Colombia.

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Thomas O. Lemke, Dept. of Zoology, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08903, USA.

Earthquake that Helped the Grebe

Dr Anne LaBastille reports that numbers of the giant pied-billed grebe *Podilymbus gigas* of Lake Atitlan, in Guatemala, were down this spring to 177 birds (from 230 two years ago) due probably to the 1976 earthquake, which opened underwater fissures so that the lake level was lowered 12-15ft. This inevitably affected the reed and cattail beds that are the grebes' habitat. But so long as the reeds can grow and the grebe numbers stay over 100 she does not think there is need to worry, and the full-time warden, Sr Edgar Bauer, has organised Indian reed cutters to plant and care for new reed beds, which they also harvest for mat-weaving. However, the earthquake also had one major beneficial effect, says Dr LaBastille. 'Plans for the hydroelectric plant will almost certainly be shelved because any engineer would be afraid to build underwater tunnels and effect a 40-ft drawdown now when the lake is so unpredictable under seismic pressures'.

What Litter can do

At the sixth meeting of Clean World International in Paris, a Canadian anti-litter group, Outdoors Unlittered, produced evidence that 8000 northern fur seals in the North Pacific were doomed to a slow death by being entangled in debris dumped overboard by fishermen and other sailors. They also reported fingerling trout girdled by pull-tab rings: apparently the fish strike at the shiny rings, miss, shoot through and get stuck. As the fish grow, the rings gradually cut their bodies in half.