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*The Avifauna
of Northern
Latin America:
A Symposium
Held at the
Smithsonian Institution
13-15 April 1966*

Avifauna in Venezuela

William H. Phelps, Jr.

I have prepared only four pages of notes, but I knew that by the time my turn came, all of you excellent professionals gathered here would have covered all the aspects of conservation which are the object of this meeting. An amateur like me has very little to add. All the problems discussed here, from different countries, exist also in Venezuela. Venezuela has recently been cataloged as a semideveloped country, and the speed with which we are developing aggravates all the conservation problems in Latin America, as William Vogt pointed out some years ago. They are now even more serious because more roads are being constructed to more remote areas. And we all know that civilization and really unspoiled nature are incompatible.

Somebody once said that a squirrel could go from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River without touching the ground. You can say today that a monkey can almost go from Venezuela to Argentina, after swimming a couple of streams like the Amazon and the Orinoco, without touching the ground. I wonder how long he will be able to do that. Man's influence on the environment in developed countries is frightening. Some of you may remember a meeting in Belgium of the UIPN some years ago. The burgermeister of Brussels stated that there is not one square meter of Belgium that has not been affected by man. When that happens conservationists are restricted to conserving Fosberg's type of habitat: one square kilometer, or a few square kilometers, not because preserving such small areas is a good idea but because that is all that is left to preserve! In South America there are still large areas that can be set aside and something is being done about it. It is important that in South America large areas be set aside as reserves very soon, while they are still considered wilderness. In England there is a Society for the Preservation of the Landscape. It is wonderful, but it also frightens one to think of the eventual establishment of such a type of society in

Venezuela where now our whole nation is "landscape."

William Vogt mentioned that the protection of watersheds may not be keeping pace with the corresponding legislation. In Venezuela this is true, but there is some progress and strict measures are being taken to enforce recently enacted hunting and conservation laws. It is evident that only with continuing education will there be marked progress in getting as many of our people as possible to grasp the concept of conservation. The sooner the better, because there is still time to preserve a lot.

In Venezuela it is forbidden to keep native birds in cages, not even parrots; however, it is practically impossible to keep people from having parrots in their patios or backyards. When the turpial was made the national bird many people wanted one, but as far as we know the turpial fortunately seems to be surviving this dangerous notoriety. A branch of the army, called the national guard, has the responsibility for enforcing the conservation laws.

The Sociedad Venezolana de Ciencias Naturales has been the pioneer in nature protection and the preservation of natural habitats, and for the last 20 years has been very active. The Department of Agriculture has an important section on conservation of natural resources which is always headed by very capable and well-trained conservationists. Every year there are many conferences and other meetings which the press, radio, and television stations, with their national networks, cover adequately. Some years ago the International Union for the Protection of Nature met in Caracas and for a week all Venezuela seemed to be talking about the protection of nature. Many thought that with the departure of the delegates the interest would disappear, but it did not. Fortunately, what Vogt said at that meeting and what he had written in his book *Road to Survival* shocked many people in Latin America into realizing the importance of conservation. The Venezuelan section of the Interna-

tional Council for Bird Preservation also has been active in bird protection. Further international cooperation in bird protection seems worthwhile and perhaps a resolution could be prepared to recommend it. We all know that the United States sets the example by not permitting the importation of birds which are not allowed to be exported by the country of origin.

Industrial pollution has been mentioned, especially by Hernández Corzo, and we in Venezuela are beginning to have our share of it because of the increasing industrialization. In the Lake Maracaibo region oil is often spilled accidentally and birds suffer. Although the oil companies responsible are often fined, the pollution of the waters of the lake and of its beaches continues to some extent.

Just one word about fires. In remote areas Indians have always signaled their location to their friends by setting vegetation on fire. Now, with matches easily available, it is much easier for them to make fires, and of course many savanna fires yearly consume at least the fringes of even the most humid of forests. In the llanos, the cattle-raising area of Venezuela, the savannas are periodically set on fire. The Sociedad Venezolana de Ciencias Naturales maintains a biological research station in the llanos, and one of its objects is to find out why the savannas are burned every year. The reason remains undetermined after several years of experiments. It is still a controversial matter.

As far as bird protection is concerned, may I say that we are not following the example set by some very industrialized nations with old civilizations where the people are legally permitted to net little songbirds for food and to kill them for sport.

Discussion

VOGT. It seems to me that Venezuela does a really outstanding job on its national parks, setting up some good areas and effectively protecting them. I wonder if you would give us some idea of the genesis of the park notion there, and the influence that Pittier might have had? This is almost an exception in the Latin culture. That there is this appreciation of these natural areas seems to me an encouraging example of the fact that people can be educated. Am I right in that?

PHELPS. Yes, Dr. Vogt. Dr. Henri Pittier did a lot for conservation in Venezuela. He was very frank and open in his constructive criticism everytime he thought nature was being abused. He was an outstanding botanist, as you know, and his remarkable personality and outspoken manner made an impact on every community where he worked. His influence was felt in Costa Rica, for example, and in other nations of Central America. His approach was merciless you might say; it almost had that "Vogt" quality.

I understand that the government of the United States will not permit the importation of birds if they are protected in the countries from which they are sent.

IBARRA. I do not intend to ask something, but to suggest that we should keep silent for a few seconds in honor of the best ornithologist in Venezuela—the late Dr. William Phelps. In Venezuela there is a famous collection of birds which is known as the Colección Ornitológica Phelps. This valuable work is all due to your father and you, who helped him. Only a few days ago I learned of his death. Therefore, I would like to suggest in this meeting that we keep silent in recognition of his life's work as an ornithologist.