

ENDANGERED SPECIES IN GUYANA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of science and technology and the varied activities of man on the local environment, both flora and fauna have become severely affected over the years to the extent that some species have become extinct. The price to be paid is great since natural curiosity and heritage are endangered. Preserving endangered species involves costs to society and to determine the value of such resources has proven to be a difficult undertaking. What can be done to stop the loss of such treasures? Certainly there is the need for conservation programmes and laws. An understanding of the current situation will help environmental educators, students, and other citizens to take an active role in determining the future of life on earth.

KEY CONCEPTS

It is also important to note for (1) the glossary purposes the following concepts:

1. Species - defined for purposes of the endangered species as any species of plants or animals as well as any distinct population of vertebrates that interbreed.
2. Endangered Species - any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.
3. Threatened Species - any species which is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.
4. Endangered Species Act. - the world's strongest laws for protecting endangered and threatened species.
5. Extinction occurs when all individual organisms of a species die.

ENDANGERED SPECIES: EXAMPLES AND REASONS

There are many species of animals and plants in Guyana and the Caribbean which can be considered as endangered species and some of these are at the threshold of becoming extinct or are extinct for practical purposes already.

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(1) Environmental Education Report, January 1982, Vol. 10, No. 1, iss. 199-6916.

They include the following: the manatee, the canje pheasant, the river turtle, the St. Vincentian parrot, and the Amazonian parrot, to name only a few. Some of the reasons for the endangered state are:

- (a) They are hunted for decorations.
- (b) They are affected by pesticides.
- (c) Their spawning grounds are eroded.
- (d) They are hunted for exportation.
- (e) They are killed for food and sport.
- (f) Unconfirmed tales doing permanent damage to the reputation of species.
- (g) Over-hunting and lack of public awareness and usefulness of the unique mammal, e.g. manatee.
- (h) The encroachment and destruction of habitats and human activity.
- (i) The indiscriminate collection of species.
- (j) The removal of vegetation by natural and biotic factors.
- (k) Other natural and/or man made factors affecting its continued existence.

THE SUN PARAKEET is a bird which is exported. These birds are reared in captivity and therefore they have a problem in mating. Exportation has an undesirable effect of reducing population. They are found in Suriname, French Guiana, and Brazil. It is believed that they have migrated from Brazil to Guyana during the dry seasons in that country in search of food. The Sun Parakeet or Aratinga Salastitalis is a very colorful bird. They invaded the corn fields in the Rupununi. Thus, they were either slaughtered or exported or were caught and their feathers used for headwear.

THE BUSH HOG OR PECCARY is made of (2) species which have been hunted for a long time and are killed in fairly large numbers for food and sport. Because their numbers are great they can be depended on in the forest to provide a more regular and adequate supply of meat. Unconfirmed tales are doing permanent damage to the reputation of a species whose only reason to be aggressive may be in defense or as a response to fear.

THE MANATEE (2). According to the Sunday Graphic November 17, 1984, page 2. "The Manatee has a peculiar and significant heritage, in that it is not only linked with the new world but Guyana was indeed the only country in the world where the animal had been kept in confinement for almost 100 years and was used for weed control purposes for over 20 years. It is also an important source of proteins. The public awareness of the usefulness of this unique animal is not widely known.

At a recent meeting, a call was made by Professor E. D. Amoroso for funds to establish a live centre for manatees, and he further pointed out that (3):

- (2) Sunday Graphic, November 17, 1984.
- (3) Noel D. Vietmeyer, The Menaced Mermaid.

"Guyana will become more aware of the scientific importance, historical significance and extraordinary opportunities useful so well as scientific opportunities useful so well as scientific applications that this country possesses in its stock of such a unique mammal of proven value in water weed consumption."

LITTLE FISHES There are many little fishes which are caught nearly every day and which are exported. It would be difficult to say what the number or the value of tropical fishes caught and exported each year amounts to. The trade in these little fishes has increased enormously over the last 20 years so much so that many valuable and attractive species are no longer available. This is so because they are: displayed on aquaria, used in schools, used in museums, used in homes and they are gems in shapes and colors.

Some are the million fish, patwa, and cat fishes. The demands continue to grow and this will further increase the pressure of fishing in the rivers with the possible result of exploitation to uneconomical levels and even to local extraction of some species. Obviously this should be avoided.

BIRDS Our birds have always been protected and were exported at one time for scientific purposes. They include doves, pigeons, krakatows, finched and ebebirds.

The Amazonian parrot has become endangered in most Caribbean Islands because of the encroachment and destruction of habitats and human activity. As a result, many of these countries have declared their parrot "A Natural Bird". In Dominica, St. Vincent, and St. Lucia, it is fully protected. This means that there can be no hunting, capturing or exporting of any of its species (4). Professor J.J. Niles in his paper at the International Council for Bird Preservation World group on parrots reiterated that Psittacine birds are parrots, macaws and parakeets. In contrast to an island situation and in the light of extensive forested areas in a continental setting free from natural disasters, with abundant food and nesting sites, their status is excellent.

In the Caribbean region stretching from Mexico to Peru and Northern Argentina, there are some 120 species of Psittacine birds of which only 26 species are found in Guyana. These birds are not protected in Guyana and as such are exploited and exported. The numbers exported annually are controlled on a quota basis to about 12 registered exporters by the Wild Life Committee and the Ministry of Agriculture. The numbers allowed are not based on precise quantitative data from surveys and studies to the population dynamics of the species, but rather on qualitative assessment from sightings and the degree to which they are pests on agricultural crops in the Coastal region. However, in the case of the sea macaw species in Guyana, only the small red - shouldered macaw is very plentiful and as such there is strict control on the exportation of the other five species. The wild life committee is concerned that "a rising threat to wild life in general in Guyana is the increasing impetus in interior development and thrust for forest exploitation, settlement and agriculture with concomitant destruction of habitats and increase in hunting for food and sport.

Although the birds face little danger in the wild since predators hardly exact a heavy toll, to prevent any over-trapping of the Amazonian species, consideration is given to imposing a closed season from January to April each year.  
(5) Close season for Curri Curi January 1st to April 1st, Ducks April 1st to September 30th.

(4) Professor J.F. Niles Paper - International Council for Bird Preservation

(5) Guyana Graphic, Monday, April 21, 1975, p. 8.

THE CANJE PHEASANT, whose emblem adorns the Guyana Coat of Arms is in danger of becoming extinct unless a law is enacted to protect it from arrows. This unique bird may become only a name to future generations of Guyanese. They are found in the Mahaicony River area of Guyana. The birds show no fear of being molested by man because the people treat them humanly. The bird is hunted for its meat which is called "Creek mutton". Because its habits restrict it to the banks of rivers, it is within reach of hunters and could easily be impeded out if this hunting is not controlled. They feed on mukka-mukka leaves.

The canje pheasant, or Hoatzin, is a cross between bird and reptile; the only such species probably in the world. The three fingers on the wing are each armed with a reptile like claw.

According to Mr. Ramsingh, "The Canje Pheasant should be preserved from becoming extinct because it is a major feature of Guyana's Coat of Arms and as such be given full protection as a national symbol".

PLANTS It is important also to consider the flora as well. These include the Century Palms of the Botanic Gardens which must be attended to almost immediately. Helraamphora is another which grows to almost one foot in length and changes from green to crimson colour before dying. It has no petal, only sepals. Orchids need to be preserved in their natural habitat and must be protected from indiscriminate looting by collections. Also the removal of mangroves has left large stretches of the shore with no natural defence against the ocean. To prevent the species from becoming more endangered and ultimately extinct there are stringent laws which exist in Guyana for the protection of wild life and the prevention of cruelty to animals. These include, according to (6) Barrister at Law, Mr. Latchma Kisson:

1. Official gazette 7 July, order no. 64 of 1979. The Wild Birds Protection Amendent order. 1979.
2. City Council Bye Laws, chapter 28.01 makes provision for the destruction of stray dogs.
3. Chapter 8.02 summary jurisdiction (offences) from sections 185 to 187 deals with cruelty to animals such as injuries, trapping and lays down penalties for violation.
4. Section 178 even gives the court the power to deprive persons convicted of cruelty, the ownership of animals.
5. Chapter 71.02 deals with animal diseases. 71.03 deals with animals control of experiments.
6. Wild Bird Protection Act - chapter 71.07 which lays down the names of all species of birds to be protected. Some birds are specifically protected during the nesting season.

#### CONCLUSION

For there to be greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of the environment in which we live, there is an imperative need for environmental education programmes at all levels. I would like to see all educators include something about endangered species in their classes. Certainly, if we can create an ethic in children it will eventually spread to include

(6) Sunday Chronicle, July 22, 1979, p. 5.

parents. Indeed, the future survival of life on this planet is dependent on the upcoming generation, so we must educate them about the importance of protecting the environment.

#### REFERENCES

1. Environmental Education Report, January 1982, Vol. 10, No. 1. Issn 0199-6916.
2. Sunday Graphic (Guyana), November 17, 1974, p. 2.
3. Noel D. Vietmeyer, The Menaced Mermaid.
4. Prof. J.F. Niles paper, International Council for Bird Preservation - paper.
5. Guyana Graphic (Guyana), Monday, April 21, 1975, p. 8.
6. Sunday Chronicle (Guyana), July 22, 1979, p. 5.