

SPEECH OF DR. MASSIMO CANESTRARI, DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF SCIENCES –
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF VENEZUELA, AT THE OPENING OF THE WORKSHOP
"CONSERVATION OF THE ORINOCO CAIMAN " BOTANICAL GARDEN - CARACAS

As civilization is more complex, man developed a strange capacity not only to attack the natural environment, but also the rest of beings that share the universe with him. This attitude has led to a progressive state of environmental deterioration and extinction of animal and vegetable species whose explanation is almost always bound to histories of power and economic prevalence, characteristic of the desire of dominance of the human race.

Venezuela in its different regions constitutes a sample of the ecological deterioration that has happened in the planet. Between 1995 and 1999, the number of species in extinction danger reached at 367.

The sad and long list includes species that survive only in cultivations, in captivity or in neutralized populations, which could be considered extinct in wild life as the mountain tapir, or the "Caripito" butterfly; others that are also on high risk without being in critical situation, as the turtles, birds or mammals, we also have species in endangered as the "cardenalito" or the Andean condor and more than 53 species in vulnerable state in medium and large term.

The Orinoco Caiman, jointly with the American crocodile, the two species of dwarf caiman and the baba, they constitute the five species of crocodiles that live in the country. This species is now on the edge of the extinction as an example of how, in few years, can be affected when are exploded in an irrational way and without any type of legal, scientific or environmental restrictions.

When there are not environmental approaches for a sustainable exploitation, the final destination of the species is the disappearance, with incalculable consequences on the balance of our biosphere. The indiscriminate hunt and the destruction of the habitat of each animal are the main causes of the quick extinction process that this happening in our territory; and almost anything has been made in this respect.

Some specialists, when observing the tendency in the extinction rate, especially that of the tropics, point out that in 20 or 30 years, near one quarter of the biological diversity of the planet will be seriously endangered of disappearing: 32% of the mammals in extinction danger, 60% of the birds, 22% of the reptiles and 66% of the amphibians can simply vanish due to the modification of their habitat and the destruction of the ecosystem.

From 1995, the Faculty of Sciences of the Central university of Venezuela has contributed directly with studies and programs dedicated to avoid the disappearance of the Orinoco Caiman, species threatened by the commercial hunt and the destruction of its habitats. That year took place the Meeting On Crocodiles in the Tropical Zoology Institute, which gathered outstanding specialists for the evaluation and upgrade of the knowledge on the different species of this group of the wild fauna.

In 1996, the Faculty held the Workshop on "Analysis of Viability of Populations and Habitats of the Orinoco Caiman and American Crocodile in Venezuela and Colombia", co-sponsored by

PROFAUNA (Autonomous Service of the Ministry of the Environment), the Foundation of Zoological Parks (FUNPZA), the Venezuelan Crocodiles Specialists Group and the Faculty of Sciences.

In that same year was subscribed the first Agreement of Cooperation between the Tropical Zoology Institute of the Faculty of Sciences, and the Ministry of the Environment, through the PROFAUNA Autonomous Service. This Agreement meant an exemplary advance in the relationships between the academic institutions and university scholars with the government organisms, and it was directed to join efforts to contribute to the solution of the problems of the country in this area. Through this Agreement, between 1995 and 1999 population studies of the species were developed on the species baba (*Caiman crocodilus*), which was subjected to a Program of rational use. These studies involved population surveys and habitat evaluations in five states of the country (Apure, Barinas, Cojedes, Guárico and Portuguesa).

A great amount of investigation works, graduate thesis and communications to scientific congress and specialized journals, were developed in the framework of the Agreement among our two institutions, generating knowledge and basic scientific information to support the action of the General Direction of Fauna of MARN, in their activities directed to achieve sustainable use of wildlife, an important resource for the rural development.

The Agreement was recently renovated in the year 2001, enlarging its goals to involve studies on conservation and management of wildlife, protection of habitats, population evaluation, legislation and application of systems of geographical information as tools for planning and control the activities of wildlife species use. The new Agreement, subscribed by the Minister Ana Elisa Osorio and the Rector Giuseppe Giannetto, is executed through the General Direction of Fauna of the MARN and the Coordination of Extension of the Faculty of Sciences.

However, the fundamental contribution of the Faculty of Sciences and of the University to the conservation and sustainable management of the natural resources of the country, resides in the formation of a high number of professionals in biology, ecology and resources management that today are acting in MARN and other public and private institutions. The School of Biology and the Tropical Zoology Institute, the same as the Graduate Courses in Ecology and Zoology, have been pioneers in the formation of professionals of excellent quality and scientific preparation.

We celebrate the realization of this International Workshop on the conservation of the Orinoco Caiman, in the magnificent scenario of the Botanical Garden, emblematic institution in biodiversity conservation of the country and which is again belonging to the University, after an arduous labor to achieve their restitution.

This workshop will allow to evaluate the Venezuelan experience in the development of the conservation Program of this species during the last 10 years, as well as the Colombian experience directed to recover the presence of the caiman in the Llanos region shared by both nations. The contribution of the international guests will allow updating the knowledge and methods for the conservationist management of the species and they will be the input for the task of impeding the disappearance of our biodiversity.

The Central University of Venezuela, through its Faculty of Sciences, today reiterates its commitment to work for the creation of an ecological culture that allows to the Venezuelans and to the Humanity to understand the ecosystems, reconciling with the nature and correct the deviations that attempt against the most valuable natural resources.

The future and the sustainable development forces to scientists and academics to contribute with solutions in the ecological matter: on it depends in a lot the life of the coming generations.

The battle in favor of the conservation of the species is a difficult fight, because at the same time that we are working in favor of man, it seemed that we are against him, but the universities and institutes of investigation, in synergy with the government and the society, can be able to establish the sustainable approaches, with clear and reliable objectives, that will contribute to brake the catastrophic predictions of extinction of species.

I want to welcome you, with the certainty that in the next two days, each one of the participants will give the best to achieve the prospective results.