

SPEECH OF MIRNA QUERO DE PEÑA, GENERAL DIRECTOR OF FAUNA OF THE
VENEZUELAN MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, AT THE OPENING OF THE
WORKSHOP "CONSERVATION OF THE ORINOCO CAIMAN", BOTANICAL GARDEN,
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF VENEZUELA, CARACAS

Mr. Vice Minister of the Environment, Engineer Alejandro Hitcher, Mr. Dean of the Faculty of Sciences of the Central University of Venezuela, Dr. Massimo Canestrari, Miss President of the Foundation Botanical Garden, Dr. María Elena Genatios, General Directors of the Ministry of the Environment, Members of the Venezuelan Crocodiles Specialists Group, Distinguished International and National guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, receive a cordial Christmas greeting and be all welcome.

With the permission of the authorities here present, I desire to manifest the role of the General Direction of Fauna of the Venezuelan Ministry of the Environment in the organization of this Workshop, directed to the "Evaluation of the Recovery Program of the Orinoco Caiman Populations", planned jointly with the Faculty of Sciences of the Central University of Venezuela.

Our country, with a territory of 916.445 square kilometers and marine spaces that cover near 900.000 square kilometers (now we went a country turned to the sea), occupies the tenth place in the world with higher biological diversity, condition that responds to the convergence of four different biogeographical regions: the Amazon, the Andes, the Guayana, and the Caribbean.

Even more, regarding the fauna diversity, Venezuela counts with approximately 1.360 reported bird species, from which 15 are endemic, and that locates us in the sixth place at world level in avifauna diversity, after Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Ecuador in the Neotropical Region, and Indonesia in Asia.

For other terrestrial vertebrates, our diversity is relatively important in relation with other mega-diverse countries (17 in total): we have reported up to now 351 mammals species, 341 reptilian species and 286 amphibians species.

Concerning biodiversity of freshwater fishes, most of them are located in the Orinoco River basin, considered among the longest and in the world, with a course of water of approximately 2.150 kilometers, finishing in the great Orinoco Delta. There have been reported around 1.250 freshwater fish species, most of them on the basin of our Father River, which locates us in the fourth place in diversity of this group at world level and, if marine fish are also included, the fish species diversity would reach a total of approximately 2.000 species.

The described diversity of invertebrates in Venezuela is remarkable. To mention only one example, in Lepidopter is the fifth more diverse and the tenth in endemics country of the world, with 2.316 well-known butterflies species.

It is important to point out that our country has responded to the acquired international commitments on conservation of the biodiversity, signing in 1992 the Convention on Biological Diversity, during the Summit of The Earth in Río de Janeiro, Brazil, which was ratified two years later as an Approbatory Law in our country.

To accomplish these commitments, Venezuela elaborated "The National Strategy on Biological Diversity and its Plan of Action."

We are living an historical moment in which the environment is receiving great importance. A sample of this is that the recently approved Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, pillar of the whole Venezuelan legislation, dedicates an exclusive Chapter to the environmental topic, making special

reference to the protection of the biological diversity and the ecological processes; in all constitutional issues, the environment is a traverse element to every matter concerning the sustainable development of the country.

The government support to the conservation programs is manifested through a budget of Bs. 261 millions in the year 2001, and also with extraordinary contributions during this year given by President of the Republic to the Ministry of Environment, through the “Ecological Overdrive Program”, consistent in Bs. 100 millions dedicated in good part to education and environmental reparation, invigoration of the Wildlife Refuges, community management of forests, and infrastructure works as the construction and operation of numerous wastewater treatment plants at national level, among other initiatives.

Remembering history of conservation in Venezuela, our country was always at the vanguard in environmental matter.

In 1937, the first National Park was created in the rainforest of Rancho Grande (Aragua State), with a surface of 107.800 hectares, named Henry Pittier in homage to the botanist who carried out the study of its flora. Even before, in 1915 and in the same state, was created the first zoo park of the country, Las Delicias Zoological Park, in the city of Maracay.

In 1962 was held the National Assembly for the Conservation of the Renewable Natural Resources, the first serious attempt that preceded the National Congresses of Environmental Conservation that were carried out every year. The result of this first Assembly are its Memoirs, that contain reports and resolutions that still today allows us to make retrospective studies that restlessness took place during almost 40 years.

In 1976, the Organic Law of the Environment was promulgated and in 1977 the Ministry of the Environment and of the Renewable Natural Resources was created, a pioneer in Latin America environmental institutions.

Also, the Universities and scientific investigation centers, together with Conservationist Organizations as the Venezuelan Society of Natural Sciences, the La Salle Natural Sciences Society, la Foundation for Defense of Nature (FUDENA), the Foundation for the Development of Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences (FUDECI), the Audubon Conservation Society, and other non governmental organizations like Econatura, Vitalis, FORJA among others, have contributed in a remarkable way to create a co-partnership with the government in order to support the environmental administration for a better quality of life to the Venezuelan people.

The wildlife, of course, has always been inside the concerns of all these sectors of the society, being considered as a natural resource and a national patrimony that should be object of scientific investigation and environmental education, included in National Sustainable Management Plans, in order to create conscience in the people about its ecological, social, historical, cultural and economic importance, to assure the survival of the species for the present and future generations.

If we locate ourselves in the present, we should necessarily to refer the advances that have had our country in this matter.

After 24 years of work since the creation of the Ministry of Environment (MARN), the wildlife, a resource traditionally underestimated and with high potentiality in the whole national territory, acquired weight, political and social connotation, within a process that culminated with the creation and consolidation of the National Fauna Guards Corp, and the creation of the General Direction of Fauna in the MARN.

Then, the fauna become from a marginal element to a vital component of the conservation of the biological diversity, as well as an important factor of the economic and social development of our country, especially in the rural areas.

This is the result of an administration effort carried out with a vision of integral work, where parallel actions of fauna management are executed together with the protection of their habitats, directed to its sustainable use and the preservation of the ecosystems. The environmental care and popularization of environmental education is the heart of the commitment with the country. Working honestly with the community participation, the whole team integrated in MARN, constituted by professionals and technicians of proven solvency, not only are the rector authority of the Venezuelan State regarding wild and aquatic fauna, but also are related with all the environmental matter in an active collaboration with the National Guard, an armed force that fulfill the environmental protection politics of the Venezuelan State, in agreement with 5 development poles: the politician, the social, the economic, the territorial and the international.

We could say that a time of coherence has begun in the Venezuelan environmental politics at national and international levels, leaded by a well structured team of professionals and technicians with clear, honest goals, convinced of its mission and vision, that could reach objectives a lot beyond of what one could suppose.

The Conservation Program of the Orinoco Caiman is an example of it.

As it is well known, the Orinoco Caiman, today it is classified as one of the 12 more endangered species of the world and one of the six endangered crocodile species.

The Orinoco Caiman (*Crocodylus intermedius*) is one of the five crocodylian species of present in Venezuela and together with the American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*); they are the only representatives of the Crocodylia family in our country. The other three species belong to the Alligatoridae family, represented by the Baba (*Caiman crocodilus*) and the dwarf caimans of the genus Paleosuchus (*P. palpebrosus* and *P. trigonatus*).

The Orinoco Caiman was an abundant species in the Orinoco river area and their tributaries, as described by naturalists of that time. However, by a commercial hunt started since 1929, their populations were decimated and its distribution reduced to the few places where it is now present.

The Conservation Program of the Orinoco Caiman in Venezuela begun in the decade of the '70 for the initiatives of the private sector, with the support of government entities and has the objective of recover the wild populations of this endangered species, through the breeding in captivity. The pioneer of this activity was the Masaguaral ranch in Guárico state, followed by the Biological Station of the El Frio ranch in Apure state, the Experimental National University of the Llanos Ezequiel Zamora - Portuguesa state, and the Puerto Miranda ranch, in Guárico state.

In general terms, the common goal of all the Orinoco Caiman captive breeding farms, has been the breeding of hatchlings up to a size between 0.8 and 1 meter long for their reintroduction to the wild habitats.

With the purpose of support the recovery of the Orinoco Caiman, the MARN created the Caño Guaritico Wildlife Refuge, Reserve of Fish and Protected Area in the Apure state, with a surface of 9.300 hectares, to release a part of the crocodiles breed in captivity. Also, other areas have been considered to reintroduce animals, such as National Parks Santos Luzardo (Apure) and Aguaro-Guaritico (Guárico), and also Caño

Garza (Apure), the Tucupido Reservoir (Portuguesa), El Cedral ranch (Apure), the Cojedes River (Cojedes) and the Manapire river (Guárico).

Totally, as a product of this great effort, more than 2.500 crocodiles have been released up to now. The evaluation of the wild population located at Cojedes River, show an average density of adult individuals of 4-5 animals/kilometer, which allows us to infer that the populations are relatively improved. So, the slow work carried out has not been in vain.

However, in spite of the hunt prohibition uninterrupted for more of 25 years for this species, and the initiatives carried out by the mentioned entities, the species continues endangered. We are conscious that there is a lot of work to do to revert such a situation, the challenge are still hard, but not invincible. We need to work together: the government, the private sector and the society, so that our country can fulfill the goal of save the Orinoco Caiman of the extinction.

Before concluding, I want to make mention to two important events. The Governor of the Cojedes state, Colonel Johnny Yanez Rangel and the MARN, will declare the Orinoco Caiman as the emblematic species of this state and it will be the pet of the national sport games in 2003.

The other information that I want to share with you, is that we are processing the declaration of a Wildlife Refuge in a portion of the Cojedes River.

Finally, I am convinced that we can fulfill the goal of saving this species of the extinction jointly with the Republic of Colombia, which also is working with this objective. This Workshop of Evaluation of the Caiman Conservation Program that today gathers us in this beautiful Botanical Garden is a proof of it.

I hope that among the results of this valuable meeting, there will be answers to problems as: the management of captive breeding farms of this species, the strategy of environmental education directed to rural and indigenous communities, the promotion of investment in conservation, the convenience of releasing animas in areas with high tourist potential, among others.

I am waiting then that the product of this workshop helps us to improve our present work and the goals that with the effort of all we have reached. The proposals of this meeting will guide us to get the traced goal: the conservation of one of the most endangered species in the world, and these proposals must be a commitment of the competent authorities of the Republic of Colombia and of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, to become in a Flag Program for both countries.