

The Condor Case: An Uphill Struggle in a Downhill Crush¹

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The debate over the Condor recovery program has gotten a little out of hand. A great deal of energy is being put into an effort to save a species which is almost certainly doomed anyway. A great many people are involved. The arguments deal less and less with scientific issues, more and more with conflicting human emotions. And great sums of money are involved.

Yet there seems to have been little discussion of the issues surrounding the Condor against a broader background of competing environmental problems which man faces. These become increasingly serious as human population densities rise and the conflicting demands made upon the environment force us, or should force us more than we seem willing to face, to enter into a broad evaluation of what we are doing. The monstrous proportions of this evaluation, made the more complex by political and philosophical concerns, cause most of those who sense the need for it to turn away, more or less reflexly; but the vast majority of the earth's population is either innocent still of what man is doing to the planet or philosophically opposed to the notion that man is doing anything wrong.

For every gain in our efforts to protect and better environments, the net effect is still progressive loss because the more general problems—such as energy, acid rain, and the greenhouse effect—are global. They transcend the importance of local gains, even impressive ones, such as the improvement of air quality in cities, the clean-up of rivers, and the setting aside of large areas of wildlands.

Ultimately, nothing contributes more to this creeping trend of net loss than population growth. Only a relatively few people speak out publicly about this, and they are ignored and often rudely dismissed. Even those open-minded about the matter do not really sense the dimensions of the threat without some direct acquaintance with what is happening in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere on earth. In the meantime, the signs of a rising awareness of the population problem are repeatedly confused by the opposition of some organized religions and other groups to contraception and abortion, and by the so-called forces of economic growth in both advanced and undeveloped nations.

It is with this general view of the global scene today that one asks, why all the special fuss about the Condor? Certainly we should try to save endangered species. The progress made with the Peregrine, Whooping Crane, and others is reassuring, even encouraging. But are the prospects for the Condor so good as to justify the large-scale investment being made? And what is more important, does the Condor properly take priority over many other problems of environment and species welfare that are staring us in the face? And will the Condor program, if it fails, then undercut other conservation efforts?

When Carl Koford and I were fellow graduate students at UC Berkeley and he was completing his doctoral thesis on the Condor, one of his observations I remember vividly is that, were it not for the pastoral economy of the Spaniards in 18th- and early 19th-century California, the Condor would almost certainly have succumbed by then. With the addition of livestock carcasses to natural food sources, along with the vast spaces and privacy still prevailing, the Condor rallied. But can we expect it to do so today, given the expanding population of the state? We have already been told that Condors have recently used the sanctuary set aside for them to only a limited degree. The annual cycle of the Condor's needs, given the vagaries of year-to-year differences in habitat conditions, are such that it wanders, it needs to wander, widely. What are the chances that these needs can be accommodated, considering that the encroachment on such areas by man, one way or another, is continuing?

All the more reason, therefore, to ask, what are our priorities? According to a report in *Science* last August (1980, 209: 670–671), a sum of \$1.25 million was already then set aside for the Condor program, \$500,000 over 5 yr by the National Audubon Society and \$750,000 over 2 yr by the federal government. This does not include California's appropriations, augmented with a special recovery plan begun in 1975. The federal plan alludes to expectations regarding the results of radio-monitoring and captive breeding gathered "until the year 2015!"

What lunacy! With people in crowded cities increasingly behaving like stressed lemmings, killing each other at rising rates, and with other, more global problems of horrendous scope, who can contemplate seriously a one-species plan the outcome of which is to be assessed 35 yr hence? Why this innocent preoccupation with one bird species which seems doomed anyway? We have to admit that the Condor, as North America's largest bird, is a potent symbol for conservation endeavors in general and for the

¹ This essay previously appeared in Newsletter 53 (Spring 1981) of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory.

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endangered species program in particular. The experience and information now accumulating among members of the Condor research teams no doubt greatly strengthen the base for future work on endangered species. The international cooperation with African and South American biologists and government agencies is another strong plus. Perhaps the Condor, while gasping its last, will do so gloriously in the cause of conservation. The recovery program and the ensuing debates have certainly helped to expand public awareness of the endangered species problem, and of conservation needs more generally.

But such arguments carry little weight when we ask what might we be doing in conservation with several million dollars that would be more likely to succeed. We are repeatedly reminded that, in any event, we have a moral obligation to save the Condor. But one's concerns are no less moral for arguing that other problems supercede those of the Condor. The business of "morality" deserves no further comment. What is referred to as the "overwhelming judgment of the ornithological community" has favored the Condor recovery program. But I am aware of no effort to debate scientifically and pragmatically any alternatives to that program. Here I do not mean how best to save the Condor. Rather, I mean, given all that money, should we invest it in Condors or somewhere else?

"Alternatives" are numerous. The important ones all have to do with the salvage and protection of environments already intruded upon heavily by man. The setting aside of habitats to protect the welfare of species clusters or communities, including both endangered and supposedly nonendangered species, seems to me to take precedence at all times over worries about a single species so blown up and bureaucratized as is the case of the Condor. Item: The riparian woodlands of central California valleys where the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Bell's Vireo, Blue Grosbeak, and other bird species are declining deserve more attention than they are getting. Item: Mono Lake, a desert basin, is suffering from dropping water level and rising concentrations of various ions that are a threat to the lake's continuing productivity. It is not only a breeding site for a large colony of the California Gull, but it is, equally importantly, a critical stopover for thousands upon thousands of Eared Grebes and phalaropes of two species. Mono Lake has been getting more attention than many environmental problems, but nowhere near enough support for the basic research that could contribute to a solution. Item: According to John Speth of the California Department of Fish and Game (1979, *Studies in Avian Biology* 2: 151), we now have left only about 30% of the prime coastal wetland habitat in existence around 1900. What does this mean with respect to the needs of migrating and wintering birds, particularly shorebirds, that represent large fractions of the breeding avifauna in the arctic and subarctic? We are only now beginning to realize that numerous species of shorebirds moving or wintering along the California coast are not flexible with respect to choice of sites to rest or stay. How much longer can we continue the trend of the past 70 yr in reducing coastal habitat without endangering not only resident fauna but also the seasonal fauna coming from large areas to the north?

These examples, considered in the light of the current fuss about the Condor, tell me that while problems of the sort just cited are recognized, we have a long way to go to deal with them in an organized way. Open forums on areal conservation problems are much needed. A good example is the international symposium on "Dynamics and Management of Mediterranean-type Ecosystems," held in San Diego in June 1981. One session deals with application of fauna information to management. In other words, the effort here is to take a "Big View," a world view, a comprehensive view, of conservation problems in a particular environment type. The Condor lives in a Mediterranean environment, but its plight pales beside the other problems that California and similar heavily populated winter-rain regions of the world face.

A more general point remains. The British marine ornithologist and environmentalist, W. R. P. Bourne, recently observed (1980, *Ibis* 122: 543) that the threat of oil spills along our marine coasts, however real and serious in the present, may be exaggerated when viewed in the frame of man's past impacts on natural environments. Oil spills, against this history of numerous earlier environmental setbacks, now blithely ignored or forgotten, are not likely to do more damage than already committed, one way or another. Without being concerned about the Condor, he was making a point pertinent here: a plea for perspective. And in these remarks about the relative merits of the Condor's case, I join him.