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### CONSERVATION COMMENTARY

## The American Ornithologists' Union's Support of Latin American Ornithology

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I read with interest both Strahl's (1992) and Foster's (1993) commentaries on furthering avian conservation in Latin American countries. They are correct that Latin American workers urgently need more support in conservation and research efforts in their countries and that North Americans should become involved in appropriate ways.

Most of the emphasis in the two commentaries was on the role of individuals. Strahl, however, also mentioned several activities that might be undertaken by the American Ornithologists' Union *as an institution*. Several of these suggested activities are already underway, and the fact that Strahl was unaware of them suggests that the AOU's efforts should be much better publicized.

It is important to remember that the AOU is not a conservation organization per se. Its charter (under which it is incorporated and obtains its tax-exempt status) states that the AOU's purposes are "(1) the advancement of ornithology through publications, support of scientific research and the organization of conferences and meetings, and (2) the conservation of birds by providing a scientific basis for management activities and education." Within these limits the AOU has become involved in the support of Latin American ornithologists and more can be done.

Strahl cited the directory to ornithology in the Neotropics that was published by the AOU's Conservation Committee (Copperband 1985). This directory provided information about Latin American individuals, organizations, and institutions that are involved in ornithological research and conservation. It was published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. The directory (English version) has now been updated by the AOU's more recently formed Committee on Pan-American Affairs (see Rosenberg and Wiedenfeld, 1993).

The AOU's *Grants, Awards and Prizes in Ornithology* (Banks 1989) was distributed gratis to all Latin American members of the AOU and to more than 100 Latin American libraries (listed by Davis 1989). The third edition of the grants booklet (Grubb 1993) includes a table showing eligibility requirements and restrictions on the locality and nature of the research being supported. A few of the grants are restricted to Latin American workers and/or conservation in the Neotropics. Many have no restrictions. Of the AOU's research awards, none is exclusively for Latin American workers, but the Alexander Wetmore Research Awards are aimed primarily at systematic, paleontological, or

Neotropical research projects. To date most of the Wetmore Awards relating to the Neotropics have been made to North American students, but they are equally available to Latin American applicants. Both the AOU's Wetmore and Van Tyne Funds are legally restricted (by the donors) to the support of research and cannot be used for activities that are solely conservationist in nature.

In 1992 the AOU, through its Committee on Pan-American Affairs, provided funds for four students (from Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina) to attend the meeting in Ames, Iowa. Funding for this activity was not provided for the Alaska meeting in 1993, but grants totalling \$5,000 will help Latin American students attend the 1994 meeting in Missoula, Montana. That joint meeting of the AOU, Cooper Ornithological Society, and the Wilson Ornithological Society should be very well attended and should provide an excellent opportunity for interaction of Latin American and North American workers.

In 1991 the AOU reduced dues for all Latin American members (and those from certain other countries) to the equivalent of the student rate. A system exists that permits AOU members to sponsor Latin American (and other) members or libraries. This opportunity was publicized in the *Ornithological Newsletter* (No. 78, 1990) and a *Recent Ornithological Literature* supplement (108:4, 1991), but the response has been limited. (However, one member generously provided five-year subscriptions to a library in each of four countries where he had done fieldwork.) Sponsorship of an individual or library is a significant, relatively inexpensive, and easy way for individuals to help Latin Americans.

The AOU assisted the IVth Neotropical Ornithological Congress (Quito, Ecuador, 1991) through direct support (\$2,500) and travel grants (\$2,700). Additionally, the AOU applied for and received an NSF grant for \$10,000 for a symposium on collection management at the congress, organized jointly by individuals from Mexico and Colombia. That grant provided travel assistance for symposium participants and made it possible to publish (in Spanish) and distribute the symposium contributions throughout Latin America (see Escalante-Pliego 1993).

In 1987 the AOU obtained a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to survey Latin American natural-history libraries and to publish the results (Davis 1989). The publication includes information about the size of each library and its emphasis, the number of sci-

entists using the library and the nature of their research, the accessibility of the library to other researchers in the area, the size of support staff, and so forth. The publication was sent to the more than 100 included libraries, as well as to all registrants to the IVth Neotropical Ornithological Congress. The survey is now being updated and will provide information for approximately 250 libraries.

The initial survey was followed up with a major project called the Latin American Library Enhancement Project (Jenkinson and Foster 1992, Foster et al. 1993) to distribute back issues of journals to many of those libraries. Many government agencies and private foundations have provided more than \$130,000 to this project that will assist more than 85 libraries. Included in the distribution are back issues (donated by the societies) of the *Auk*, *Condor*, *Wilson Bulletin*, *Journal of Field Ornithology*, and *Colonial Waterbirds*, plus *Ornithological Monographs*, the *Check-List of North American Birds*, *Studies in Avian Biology*, publications of the Western Foundation for Vertebrate Zoology, the Proceedings of the XIXth International Ornithological Congress, and the recently published book on Neotropical migrant landbirds (Hagan and Johnston 1992). The project, which is now under the auspices of the Council of Biology Editors, includes a variety of natural-history disciplines, such as mammalogy, ecology, marine biology, botany, and entomology. To date, 29 societies and institutions have donated library materials. In the initial distribution (to 17 libraries), almost 10 tons of publications were mailed.

In 1992 the AOU provided challenge grants to 10 Latin American libraries, which permitted each library to purchase \$600 worth of ornithological books, if it could match a \$500 AOU challenge grant with \$100 from other sources. This undertaking resulted in well over 100 major reference books being placed in these libraries.

Within the last several years, the AOU provided some start-up funds for the journal *Ornitología Neotropical*, helped underwrite the publication of an index relating to West Indian birds (Loftin 1992), and provided a grant of \$500 to assist in the formation of the Peruvian Ornithologists' Union through the publication of a directory to Peruvian ornithology (Torres 1992).

Institutional involvement in support of Latin American ornithology ultimately means individual involvement. Awards cannot be given if money is not available; committees cannot administer awards unless they have hard-working members; Spanish abstracts cannot be published unless dedicated translators are available; special publications cannot appear unless someone prepares them, edits them, and oversees their printing; foundation grants cannot be obtained unless someone writes proposals, and so on.

I encourage ornithologists who have suggestions or questions about these matters to write to Alejandro

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Many workers, too many to name, have been instrumental in the success of the various AOU Latin American projects. David A. Wiedenfeld (first Chair of the Pan-American Affairs Committee), Jonathan Bart and Thomas E. Lovejoy (both former Chairs of the Conservation Committee), and their committee members deserve much credit. The untiring efforts of Mercedes S. Foster, who has been deeply involved in almost every project mentioned herein, are especially noteworthy.

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