

FACTS, INFERENCES, AND SHAMELESS SPECULATIONS

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The World's Most Important Man



I HAD DINNER LAST SUMMER WITH the world's most important man. Our dinner was short, and he is no longer that important, but the conversation still haunts me.

His name is Victor Pulido. On the

date of our dinner Victor was Director of the National Parks of Peru. He resigned a few months later; hence his decline from preeminence. But the fact is that for a year or so Victor Pulido had a portfolio of astounding importance to life on this planet.

World's most important man? As director of the national park system of Peru, Victor Pulido managed a park system of some 23 protected areas that encompass roughly 55,000 square kilometers of land or 4.3% of the surface area of that country.

Within those hectares can be found a dazzling portion of the world's biological diversity.

Precisely how much isn't known. To paraphrase John Terborgh, despite the fact that humans have been making nuclear weapons for over 40 years, despite our ability to produce micro-engineered tweezers and pumps smaller than mites in a hummingbird's nares, despite such wondrous medical techniques as liposuction and cosmetic tummy-tucks, we still don't know how many species of organisms



A glimpse of Victor Pulido's national park system in Peru, where he managed "55,000 square kilometers of the world's most dazzling biological diversity". Photograph/C. Munn/VIREO (m09/6/042).

inhabit the planet.

Estimates for the number of animal species on Earth range from something less than 20 million to more than 40 million. Most of the uncertainty bubbles out of the Class Insecta, which in fact is where most of the diversity exists in the first place. Now a factor of 2 or so is not bad for biology, and given that systematists' semantics may shove that number about by several-fold without the discovery of even one more life-form new to science, perhaps a range of that magnitude is unavoidable.

Even if we don't know that absolute total, we can get some handle on Peru's (and Pulido's) importance by using information from birds. To do this we must first accept the premise that in some rough way the distribution of bird species richness parallels that of biological diversity in general. Accept that assumption and the rest is reasonable—some 9,000 bird species inhabit the planet. Of these roughly 1,700 species of bird inhabit Peru and most of them can be found within those Peruvian park boundaries. Mind-boggling birds. Birds that Ted Parker still lusts for, that Murray Gellmann yet quarks about, that Charlie Munn stalks in humid, jungle dreams. 1,700 is almost 20 percent of bird diversity on earth. And while surely the geography of life is too complex to be indicated by birds alone, this simple calculation suggests that Sr. Pulido had as much as 20% of the world's biological diversity under his command.

That's fine: George Bush controls 33% of the world's military spending. Mikhail Gorbachev manages a little less than that but, in addition, rules 100% of the world's breeding Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Humans consume, directly or indirectly, something like 40% of the world's terrestrial primary produce.

So concentrations of power are nothing new, and thankfully, Pulido is a good man. It is only once you start to hear Pulido describe the resources available to him (and now to his successor) to get his job done that a sense of doom begins to arrive, squall-like on thundering, water buffalo feet.

The Director of National Parks of Peru works out of Lima, the capital. Most of the parks are in the hinterland, some accessible only after ar-

duous travel even in times of national tranquillity, most decidedly not the case in a Peru beset by the Shining Path. He has no fleet of vehicles. He has no radios to use for communication with park managers. He has no phone.

Think about that. The Director of National Parks of Peru has no phone in his office. No Xerox machine. No computer. No FAX. In fact, one airmail letter to Washington, D.C. costs half a percent of Pulido's monthly salary, and given that there is virtually no budget for postage in the National Park account, and that to make it through the choked mail system he must find a means of getting it mailed from the United States directly, Pulido winds up paying for much of the mail himself.

In 1989, Pulido's budget for central administration of the park system—salaries, expenses, operations of vehicles and equipment—everything that makes a park system work was \$12,000 US. His staff included fewer than 125 people nationwide. That translates to over 60,000 hectares per guard compared to 1,800 per hectare in the United States. Guards, mind you, without vehicles, for the most part, paid (when paid...and two I met had not been paid for three months) somewhere between \$30 and \$100 per month, with families often living a day or more away from their post of duty, or if they are lucky, a couple of hours' walk.

These facts speak for themselves. The challenge facing national conservation efforts in places like Peru is more than daunting. They are apocryphal. Yet somehow the Pulido's of Peru, Panama, and Paraguay, of Colombia, Suriname, Belize, Madagascar, Tanzania, Malaysia, Thailand, and a myriad of other countries facing, simultaneously, the rape of their biological riches and an AIDS-like wasting of their national economies, somehow those Pulido's keep slugging forward.

Not all of them win: many measure success by how much they have slowed destruction. Markedly fewer eke out progress toward better protection of the biological wealth of their countries. Whichever, each is a key player in efforts to maintain the world's biological diversity. They deserve our support—moral, political, and financial.

What can we do? Get involved. Let your elected officials know that the Earth's biological diversity has a political constituency: you. Pester them. Prod them. Provoke them. Small shifts in our government's expenditures in foreign aid could make an immense difference in the funds available for implementing useful conservation policies. Changes in the way that the World Bank and its brethren behave could work wonders, too. In theory this is already underway—I have a pile of clippings that describe the 'greening' of the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank. But buried in that pile is another describing a new World Bank venture that will put \$198,000,000 for malaria control using DDT into the Amazon basin. DDT. In 1990 Ask your congressman to get the facts for you on that one.

These are the things you can do individually, also. The next time you go birding in the tropics, make a difference. First, don't even go unless your tour subscribes to Audubon's Travel Ethics. While you are there, see if your group's observations can be incorporated into a data base that fuels conservation action in the country you are visiting. Find out what the effective, local conservation groups are. Calculate what your trip will cost you. Add 25% of that-or more-and leave it behind with one or more of the leading organizations for conservation in the country you have just enjoyed.

As you do all these things (send me copies of your letters to Congress), bear in mind that conservation for Pulido is more than protecting a place "para que se puedan pasear los gringos." He's been fighting for the future of his country, for the health and prosperity of his fellow Peruvians, and for life on Earth. Who knows, if we all do our parts there may be enough left to go back for a second (third, fourth. .) visit. ■

—Director, W. Alton Jones
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