

Conservation Without Borders: The 20th Annual Meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology

The US based Society for Conservation Biology has been branching out recently, and every other year now holds its annual meeting, the largest in the academic conservation calendar, outside its own borders. These overseas events seem to attract a little more attention, are a little more cosmopolitan, and certainly remain more firmly rooted in the memory. The 2005 meeting in Brazil, with its caipirinha-fuelled carnival atmosphere and the lure of the Pantanal and Amazon for those with a few days to spare is a case in point. And the 2002 meeting hosted by the Durrell Institute for Conservation and Ecology in the UK is rapidly attaining legendary status, the Woodstock of SCB meetings amongst the conference circuit faithful (a lot more people claim to have been there than actually were).

Against this backdrop and despite its outward looking theme, *Conservation Without Borders*, I was not expecting too much from this year's 20th Anniversary meeting in San Jose, California (24–28 June). The town, an anonymous terminus in the concrete continuity of Silicon Valley, offered little but a yearning for escape to Steinbeck's nearby Pacific coast. One couldn't have felt further from biodiversity in the characterless and imposingly large conference facilities wedged between hotels. A motivational speaker performing concurrently in the adjoining halls only added to the otherworldliness of it all.

Yet the meeting did have its highlights. For the first time it was held in conjunction with the Society for Conservation GIS meeting, and the role of geospatial technology and analysis in conservation science and practice was a theme strongly represented in many of the oral presentations. Equally compelling, and reflecting the overall theme of the meeting, was a well attended symposium on migratory ungulates. Ranging across the globe from Serengeti wildebeest to saiga in central Asia, this session brought home the complexities of conserving and managing populations that don't remain conveniently within protected areas or national boundaries. The best, however, was an entirely American example. Joel Berger's stop-motion imagery of the 600 km pronghorn migrations in Wyoming revealed some severe geographical bottlenecks. Could

it be used to help convince policy makers and local stakeholders to make better development decisions in this landscape?

The meeting moved well beyond the biological sciences including, for example, some practical sessions on donor engagement and journalism. There were also very relevant sessions on climate change and disaster vulnerability. Yet as always one can become numbed or frustrated by the endless stream of 15 minute presentations that reveal little of the substance behind the headlines and that offer no opportunity to interact with the presenters. To counter this, the organizers of the San Jose meeting tried something a little different: scientific 'speed dating'. The idea was that 15 speakers would each receive 3 minutes to summarize their presentation and sell themselves to the audience, after which the remaining hour or so of the session would be devoted to a discussion marketplace, with the audience circulating among the speakers according to their particular interests.

Two experimental scientific speed dating sessions were held at the meeting, and by all accounts they were a popular choice with presenters; over 300 applications were received for the 30 slots available. The sessions themselves were interesting for their novelty, and certainly proved a point. The first, comprising biological topics, saw only minimal discussion afterwards, with only a couple of speakers holding a crowd and many left talking to themselves. In some ways the presentations were too rushed, and it was impossible to concentrate as intensely as required for the full round of speakers over 45 minutes. The second session was considerably better, in part because the focus on social and policy-related topics lent itself well to the discussion format, in part because the speakers did a more creative job of selling themselves and their topic in their allotted 3 minutes, and in part because the organizers managed the crowd, with a forced rotation every 20 minutes during the discussion period. It was a much livelier session (as one of the speakers, perhaps I would say that) and I hope that something along these lines is included in future SCB meetings.

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First successful fledging of blue-headed conures on Margarita Island, Venezuela, in 8 years

Three species of psittacids inhabit the Caribbean island of Margarita, located 50 km off the north-eastern Venezuelan coast: Margarita's blue-headed conure *Aratinga acuticaudata neoxena*, Margarita's brown-throated parakeet *Aratinga pertinax margaritensis* and the yellow-shouldered parrot *Amazona barbadensis*. Both *Aratinga* subspecies are endemic to the island. *A. acuticaudata neoxena* is categorized as Critically Endangered, and *A. barbadensis* as Endangered in Venezuela and Vulnerable on the 2006 IUCN Red List. The principal threat to all species is their capture for the illegal pet trade.

Blue-headed conures nest exclusively in natural cavities in black mangrove trees *Avicenia germinans* within the Laguna de La Restinga National Park. Although their breeding habitat is protected, poaching of nestlings and even brooding adults is widespread and has been for at least the past 20 years. Poached birds supply a well-developed local market, driven by long-standing cultural traditions, as well as perhaps a broader national and international parrot trade (although this is more difficult to confirm).

The Venezuelan National Parks Institute (INPARQUES) currently lacks the personnel and equipment to patrol Laguna de La Restinga effectively. Therefore, inspired by the success of a programme aimed at increasing recruitment in yellow-shouldered parrots on the island, José Manuel Briceño-Linares (Fieldwork Coordinator for the Venezuelan NGO Provita on Margarita), initiated a similar programme for blue-headed conures in 2004. The last previous recruitment event took place in 1998, when the entire population was estimated at 80 individuals. Recent censuses of this aging population place the total number of individuals at *c.* 30 birds.

With traditional captive breeding not feasible because of a combination of logistical, cultural, historical and biological factors, the technique implemented by Briceño-Linares consisted of hiring young unemployed men and potential poachers as biomonitors, using financial support provided by Loro Parque Fundación and the Iniciativa de Especies Amenazadas (IEA). Douglas Vázquez and Roberth Fernández, from the towns of Chacachacare and La Restinga, respectively, spent the first year of the project locating nests and protecting them during the entire 2005 breeding season, almost around the clock. José Fernández and Manuela Vázquez, Roberth's parents, volunteered their boat for water transportation. Despite their best efforts, all fledglings were lost to poachers, who took the parakeets one night when the nests were left unprotected for a few hours.

In 2006, therefore, a partial captive breeding approach was implemented in collaboration with Deicys González and Pedro Vázquez of INPARQUES-Laguna de La Restinga. During the day, D. Vázquez and R. Fernández guarded the two known nests, and at night they collected the four known nestlings and took them to the INPARQUES office. Before dawn the following day, nestlings were returned to their parents. This innovative system thus took advantage of INPARQUES' legal authority to actively manage a species under its jurisdiction while at the same time reducing the personnel and financial burdens of field patrolling, and also overcoming many of the complicated obstacles to full captive breeding.

After 5 weeks of constant surveillance, on July 14, 15, 17 and 28, 2006, respectively, all four blue-headed conures fledged. This figure is both inspiring and sobering. On one hand, it is the first confirmed recruitment to the population in 8 years, increasing the estimated population by 10% within 1 year. On the other hand, it is of great concern that only two active nests of this endemic subspecies were located after 2 years of intensive fieldwork, and so few fledglings were available to be protected. Additionally, one parent and one fledgling were poached at night when the two other nestlings of this nest were being protected, with those nestlings then fostered to another nest.

However, Briceño-Linares is hopeful that he has found a successful and innovative method to secure new recruits in a population that was otherwise certain to become extinct within a few years. Prior to this intervention the only hope seemed to be traditional captive breeding until the hypothetical day when poaching was under control, at which point reintroduction (in itself risky and expensive) could be attempted. This hybrid strategy thus appears promising for both short- and long-term reasons. With increased funding, and the expansion of this community-based conservation effort, *A. acuticaudata neoxena*, the only subspecies in the group known to nest exclusively in mangrove swamps, may yet escape extinction.

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A turning point for Jamaica's Cockpit Country

Jamaica's Cockpit Country encompasses *c.* 30,000 ha of karst terrain composed of conical hills and fertile valleys (cockpits) in the centre-west of the country. Despite being recognized as a Centre of Plant Diversity, it has

received far less conservation attention than similarly important areas in Jamaica such as the Blue Mountains. It is, however, one of the Island's most important sites for endemic plants and animals. Agriculture, starting with colonial sugar plantations, is long established in many of the peripheral valleys of Cockpit Country but relative inaccessibility has meant that the interior has been less affected. However, forests have been altered by the removal of precious timbers such as *Swietenia mahogoni* and by localized, often temporary, conversion to traditional agriculture. Cockpit Country is now a Forest Reserve, managed by the Forestry Department of Jamaica for watershed and biodiversity protection. Commercial logging and conversion to timber plantation have been halted and agricultural conversion is no longer permitted. The Reserve is composed of a diverse landscape of mature but high graded forest with patches of secondary forest, remnant pine plantations and the occasional bracken-dominated old field. Along the few roads of the reserve some disturbance is caused by cutting of saplings for yam poles, and although encroachment does not extend deep into the forest, at some sites where endemic plants are found the lack of control over this activity is a concern.

However, reduction in agricultural activity, partially stimulated by more attractive employment opportunities in the tourist developments of Jamaica's north coast, and the halting of logging and plantation forestry, has opened a window of opportunity for the conservation of Cockpit Country. Recent monitoring work by Windsor Research Centre and others has confirmed Cockpit Country's importance as a centre for endemic fauna; 27 of the 28 species of Jamaica's endemic birds are still found in the Reserve along with the endangered Jamaican boa *Epicrates subflavus* and possibly the last viable population of the giant swallowtail butterfly *Pterourus homerus*. Despite ongoing research by botanists at the Institute of Jamaica and University of the West Indies, many endemic plants have not been seen for decades. Initial surveys by these institutions, in collaboration with Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, have confirmed that some of these species, including *Sebastiania howardii*, *Phyllanthus axillaris* and *Lasiocroton trelawniensis* are still to be found at their original collection localities but at least one site was found to have undergone severe disturbance and is now composed of young secondary forest with no sign of the endemic *Tilandsia trelawniensis*. More floral surveys, supported by the National Geographic Society, are planned to assess the status of other endemics and to identify key conservation areas within Cockpit Country.

The Forestry Department is promoting the devolution of forest management to Local Forest Management

Committees across Jamaica. This offers the promise of forest resources being managed for local benefit and such committees are in the process of being created in Cockpit Country with the support of The Nature Conservancy and Windsor Research Centre. Against this background of renewed interest and real progress looms the expansion of one of Jamaica's most important export industries, bauxite mining. Bauxite deposits occur in the valley bottoms of Cockpit Country and whether and how extraction of these deposits is to be carried out are the most critical questions facing this remarkable island-within-an-island.

Cockpit Country is thus at a turning point. The recent increase of activity by a number of national and international institutions concerned with its conservation is therefore timely.

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Building global capacity for amphibian conservation: new course launched

On 19 June 2006 the International Training Centre of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Jersey, British Channel Islands, launched its first multi-disciplinary course for amphibian conservationists, *Amphibian Biodiversity Conservation*. The course was designed through collaboration between the Centre and the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, University of Kent, UK, with the aim of building capacity within some of the world's most amphibian-rich countries to combat the current amphibian extinction crisis. With approximately one third (c. 2,000) species of amphibian currently categorized on the 2006 IUCN Red List as being threatened with extinction there is every reason to be concerned about current rates of species loss and the need to develop in-country capacity for amphibian conservation.

Seventeen participants from 15 countries, including Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia and India, attended the 12-day course, bringing with them a diverse range of issues, problems and solutions concerning amphibian diversity loss. The course brought together some of the

world's leading amphibian experts, including Tim Halliday, Trevor Beebee, Andrew Cunningham and Richard Griffiths. The course also benefited greatly from the expertise of Gerry Marantelli, Director of the Amphibian Research Centre, Australia, and his pioneering work to demonstrate how to create biosecure captive facilities to support the conservation of wild populations through research, reintroduction and applied education.

The course was run at the headquarters of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and participants were therefore able to have firsthand experience of the captive facilities designed to support the ongoing conservation programmes for the Mallorcan midwife toad *Alytes muletensis*, Montserrat mountain chicken *Leptodactylus fallax*, and the local agile frog *Rana dalmatina*, as case studies for critical analysis. Participants were encouraged to question existing knowledge and approaches to amphibian conservation, and in particular to recognize the value of adopting a multi-disciplinary approach to conservation action, based on objective decision-making processes.

The course covered topics such as population and disease monitoring, field post-mortem and tissue preservation, bio-security in animal movements, problem analysis, prioritizing and planning, and intensive species and metapopulation management. Participants were able to use the current head-starting and restocking programme for the agile frog on Jersey as a project for critical analysis and discussion.

Feedback from the course has been excellent from both participants and lecturers, providing the support needed to develop and run the course in subsequent years. All lecturers have stated their interest in continuing to help in the future evolution of the course and in taking it into regions of high amphibian diversity and threat. Funds are currently being sought to offer the course in other locations, and the course directors would be delighted to hear from organizations interested in hosting future iterations of the course. This would help to ensure that the course is accessible to conservationists working in countries with some of the world's most diverse, unique and threatened amphibian assemblages.

For more details or to discuss potential venues for future iterations of the course contact the International Training Centre, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Les Augrès Manor, Trinity, Jersey, British Channel Islands, JE3 5BP, or email us at itc@durrell.org

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FFI supports research into De Brazza monkey

The De Brazza monkey *Cercopithecus neglectus*, a member of the guenon group of Old World monkeys, is known to occur in Kenya, but little is known about its status and distribution. The species inhabits forests along rivers and streams, and c. 70% of its time is spent in the mid- and lower-canopy layers, making it hard to survey. Previous investigations of this monkey's status in Kenya estimated the population contained fewer than 200 individuals, and was at risk of local extinction unless urgent measures were implemented. Now a 3-year survey of the status of De Brazza monkeys in western Kenya has revealed a rosier picture, with the region's population estimated at 716 individuals. However, the species is still at risk, mainly from habitat loss, but also from poaching, and killing in retaliation for crop damage. Fauna & Flora International has awarded the researcher who carried out this most recent survey, Iregi Mwenja, a grant under the Flagship Species Fund to determine the conservation status of a recently discovered population of De Brazza monkeys in the Mathews Ranges Forest Reserve, an area outside the species' known ecological and geographic range. Once the conservation status of the population in the Reserve is known the information will be used to set conservation priorities and prepare management recommendations. Ultimately the researchers hope to set up an integrated conservation programme that includes ecological monitoring and ecotourism. For more information on projects supported by the Flagship Species Fund, please visit <http://www.fauna-flora.org/about/fsf.html>

Botanic Gardens focus on plant conservation in a changing world

Botanic Gardens Conservation International and the Botanic Garden Veira y Clavijo, Gran Canaria, recently organized a meeting on plant conservation and climate change. Climate change is likely to have a major impact on plant diversity, with the extinction of many thousands of species predicted by the end of the century. Recognizing the need to respond to this challenge within the framework of the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation, a meeting of the Gran Canaria Group was convened in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain on 10–11 April 2006. As a result of the meeting the Group formulated *The Gran Canaria Declaration on Climate Change and Plant Conservation*. The Declaration strongly recommends the preparation of an action plan correlative to the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation on climate change and plants and calls upon governments to take urgent action to increase protection for the

world's plants. Whilst recognizing the need for protection of the world's plant diversity in the wild, the Group also agreed that *ex situ* collections have a key role to play in securing the conservation of wild plant species as an insurance policy for the future and as support for the adaptation of livelihoods to climate change. Furthermore, the Group considered that with over 200 million visitors annually worldwide, botanic gardens have the capacity to play a leading role in heightening public awareness of climate change and plant conservation. For copies of the Gran Canaria Declaration, visit <http://www.bgci.org>

Remembering two Statesmen of conservation

Two key members of Fauna & Fauna International, Paul van Vlissingen and Richard Fitter have passed away within the last year, and tributes to their lives and achievements appear below.

Paul van Vlissingen

Paul van Vlissingen was passionate about conservation and was an active member of Fauna & Fauna International's Vice Presidency. As a member of the family firm, SHV, founded in 1896, he was one of the wealthiest men in Europe. Unlike many others, however, he spent his life finding thoughtful and useful ways to use his wealth, and was known in particular for his funding of medical research, for being a considerate landowner, and for the establishment of African Parks Conservation.

An early interest in the outdoors and poetry, combined with his business acumen, led to purchases of substantial estates in Britain: the 80,000-acre Letterewe estate at Wester Ross in the Scottish Highlands, which he acquired in 1977, and the Conholt Park estate, near Andover, Hampshire, acquired in 1992. In the 1990s, with groups representing walkers and climbers and his then partner Caroline Tisdall, he negotiated an agreement about access to his land: the Letterewe Accord. This became something of a model for subsequent agreements and legislation in the Scottish parliament. His restoration of Conholt Park made it into an important downland conservation area and shooting estate in England, demonstrating that sustainable use and landscape preservation are natural partners. *The Scotsman*, in its obituary for him, noted that he was Scotland's 'biggest foreign landowner and arguably its most progressive laird', and a pioneer in allowing ramblers and mountaineers access to his land.

Perhaps Paul's most significant recent contribution to conservation, and the one for which he was best known in recent years, was African Parks Conservation (<http://www.africanparks-conservation.com/>), a conservation project currently working in six African countries. He and Caroline started this at the request of Nelson Mandela in 1998. The project's aims are to secure the future of some of Africa's vulnerable protected areas through effective management and innovative financing, and by ensuring that these global resources directly contribute to real economic development and poverty alleviation for local people.

Paul was a great ambassador for FFI. He had a pragmatic approach to conservation that was not always favoured by some, but he was unafraid of this being unpopular. Unfortunately he died before his approach could be proven. Whilst he made a personal contribution to conservation of his estates at Letterewe and Hampshire, the greater impact of his work in African Parks Conservation continues, headed by his former Chief Executive and with the help and support of close friends and international figures, staffed by an experienced group of conservationists handpicked by Paul.

Richard Fitter

Richard Sidney Richmond Fitter, Honorary Secretary of the then Fauna Preservation Society for 1969 – 1981, was that rare mixture of gentleman, diplomat and scientist. He was a quiet man of great humility, one of the last of the great British naturalists, and he had considerable influence over the conservation infrastructure that we see today. As Honorary Secretary he attended many key meetings, such as the founding of IUCN, the Convention on Migratory Species, and CITES. As well as being a great naturalist he was keenly aware of international issues, and had a sophisticated understanding of conservation politics.

Amongst the many aspects of his work for which he became known, Richard was a pioneer of the natural history guide and 'Fitter and Richardson', as it was known (*The Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds*, illustrated by R.A. Richardson, which first appeared in 1952) was a huge success and one of the first of the modern field guides. His earlier books included the widely admired *London's Birds* (1949) and *London's Natural History*, which was the third in the Collins New Naturalist series. In 1956, with David McClintock, he produced the popular *Pocket Guide to Wild Flowers*, again for Collins. Amongst his other books was *The Birds of Britain and Europe, with Africa and the Middle East*, which became known as 'Heinzel, Fitter and Parslow', published in 1972. Richard wrote on natural history throughout his life, and as recently as 2002 published an article in *Science* (Rapid Changes in Flowering Time in British Plants; 296(5573), 1689–1691), with his biologist

son A.H. Fitter, based on his 50 years of personal records of 385 species, in which he showed that they flowered four and a half days earlier in the 1990s than they had in 1954–1990. Some of Richard's work, such as *The Penguin Dictionary of Natural History* (1967), was produced with his wife, Maisie, herself an accomplished editor, writer and naturalist (and editor of *Oryx* from 1963 to 1981). An extensive list of Richard's publications can be found in a *Wikipedia* entry about him (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Fitter).

In a long and productive working life Richard was, amongst other occupations, at the Institute for Political and Economic Planning, with RAF Coastal Command during the Second World War, secretary of the Wildlife

Conservation Committee of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, assistant editor of the *Countryman*, director of the intelligence unit of the Council for Nature, and 'open air correspondent' of *The Observer*. He also served on the councils of the RSPB and the British Trust for Ornithology, founded the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists' Trust, and helped found the British Deer Society.

It is a testament to Richard's wide-ranging knowledge that when he died, at 92 years of age, he was writing a book on the natural history of France.

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