

Threat to the Pantanal

by 'Tracks'

The Pantanal is the world's largest wetland. It is a seasonally inundated depression wholly contained within the Upper Paraguay Basin in central Western Brazil, Eastern Bolivia and North-West Paraguay. The Pantanal of the states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul in Brazil encompasses nearly 140,000 km².

The region is extremely rich in floristic and faunistic diversity due to its privileged location, surrounded by four biomes; the tropical Amazon rainforest, the subhumid savannas of Central Brazil, the Atlantic humid forest and the semi arid scrub forest of the Chaco. It is the last refuge for many of South America's threatened or endangered species.

RAIN ABSORPTION

The Pantanal is also geographically and hydrologically positioned to attenuate and reduce runoff from the Upper Paraguay Basin. It acts as a sponge absorbing rain and seasonal floods, then releasing the water slowly throughout the year. Fundamental to this process are rocky sills which regulate the water flow out of this wetland, acting as a valve.

This wetland with its extraordinary diversity and abundance of wildlife is a threatened region.

Deforestation, expanding agriculture, illegal hunting and fishing, and pollution of the water with herbicides, pesticides, and by-products of fuel alcohol production and mining, have all caused a progressive deterioration of the natural environment. These threats are placing at risk one of the world's most important ecosystems.

ADDITIONAL THREAT

But there is now an additional threat. A project that some scientists say will dry out 40% of the Pantanal within 20 years. A project that is expected to have significant hydrological and environmental impacts not just on the Pantanal, but on over 3,400 km along the Paraguay and Parana rivers. This project is known as the Parana-Paraguay Hidrovia project.

This project entails navigational improvement along the existing Parana-Paraguay waterway, to link five countries of South America; Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. The project has been put forward as the backbone of the



Wild Hyacinthine Macaws feeding on palm nuts

Photo: C. Munn

Mercosur agreement in the hope of developing regional and national economies. The project consists of extensive river engineering works, including channel straightening, dredging, blasting of rocky sills, and other structural interventions to render 3,442 km of the river navigable for ocean going vessels all the year-round. Improvements will be carried out from the downstream point at Nueva Palmira, Uruguay to the upstream point at Caceres, Brazil, near the headwaters of the Upper Paraguay river.

The proposed navigational improvements are likely to have a substantial impact on the flood regime of the Upper Paraguay river. The blasting of rocky sills as a means of deepening the navigation channel is seen as the most significant planned intervention.

STUDIES NEARING COMPLETION

Engineering and environmental studies are due to be completed, which have been funded mainly by the Inter America Development

Bank and by the United Nations Development Programme.

Hidrovia is the source of significant concerns among indigenous peoples, environmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, and research institutions and universities. The uniqueness of the Pantanal ecosystem is widely recognised and the need for its preservation on both intrinsic and economic grounds.

Editor's Note:

We would appeal to ALL readers to protest about this project development, not least because damage to the Pantanal would be detrimental to Hyacinth Macaw and other parrot populations. Please write to the following three governmental organisations:-

Comite Intergubernamental de la Hidrovia, Jesus G. Gonzales, Secretaria Ejecutiva del C.I.H., Construcciones Portuarias y Vias Navegables, Av, Espana 2221-4 piso, 1107 Buenos Aires - Argentina.

United Nations Development Programme, Emma Torres, Chief of the Regional Programme Division at the Bureau for Latin America & the Caribbean (Co-ordinator for the Hidrovia Project), One United Nations Plaza (Room 2286), New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Inter-American Development Bank, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, Paul Dulin, Regional Environmental Consultant, Ing. Normando R. Birolo - Sector Specialist, Esmeralda 130 - Piso 20, 1035 - Buenos Aires - Argentina.

Please use the following letter as a guide:-

Dear xxx,

As a member of the *World Parrot Trust* and someone who is deeply concerned about conservation and the environment, I was horrified to learn that such an important ecosystem as the Pantanal is threatened by the proposed Hidrovia project. The rich and diverse flora and fauna and the endangered species which occur there must be protected from this project which will further degrade the world's largest and most important wetland. It will cause a further decline in, for example, numbers of the Hyacinthine Macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*), now classified as an endangered species. Already this species is bringing in income from ecotourism to the region. The potential income from tourism there is enormous. The uniqueness of this region is recognised worldwide. I would urge everyone concerned to reconsider the wisdom of this project. The Pantanal must be preserved for future generations on both intrinsic and economic grounds.