New Tradition for the Catholic Church saves Palms and Parrots

By PAUL SALAMAN

Wax Palms (Ceroxylon quindiuense) - the world’s tallest palm and an endangered species - are massacred each Easter to provide palm fronds for the Palm Sunday processions and used to adorn churches throughout the Colombian Andes (See PsittaScene Feb 2002, No 50). Unfortunately, the Critically Endangered Yellow-eared Parrot (Ognorhynchus icterotis) is dependent on the wax palm for nesting and roosting, so the parrot’s survival is inextricably linked to the plight of the wax palm. So our euphoria at discovering a population of Yellow-eared Parrots in western Colombia last year was short-lived as our worst nightmares were realised when thousands of people waved wax palm fronds to church on a glorious Palm Sunday morning in 2001.

As there are less than a thousand wax palms scattered across the parrot’s range in the Western Andes, their survival and that of the palm appeared depressingly remote. The Fundación ProAves - Colombia team, that operates Project Ognorhynchus - knew we had to act quickly and effectively to avoid the impending catastrophe for both species. There and then, the ProAves team made a pact to do everything possible to avoid the sight of another wax palm frond in a parade.

But how to change the centuries old tradition of the Catholic Church celebrating Palm Sunday? Whilst the national laws were on our side, we had to change the fundamental mentality of the community and, critically, gain the support of the Catholic Church. So the ProAves team, led by Alex Cortés, Pablo Flórez, Jose Castaño, and Marcela Vargas, immediately implemented an Action Plan with the support of Fundación Loro Parque to change the attitude of the local people surrounding the Yellow-eared Parrot nesting and foraging areas.

After Palm Sunday 2001, the ProAves team made great leaps towards protecting the parrot and palm. We conducted a highly successful “World Birdwatch” day featured on regional TV, and established an intensive environmental awareness campaign, including founding an ecological group called ‘Friends of Nature’ that rapidly grew to over 100 students and a further 500 keen to join! Research successes were equally impressive, with the roosting and nesting sites uncovered revealing the total population at a staggering 277 individuals - two thirds of the global population! Clearly, much was at stake on Palm Sunday in protecting the Yellow-eared Parrots’ stronghold.

Yet, as we approached Palm Sunday in March 2002, one final daunting obstacle seemed impassable... the Catholic Church in the study area was reluctant to change the tradition of using wax palms, even though it is now illegal, to alternatives such as other flags, balloons, tree branches, and some other species of palm (similar to Ceroxylon). After months of fruitless discussions with the Church our campaign looked doomed to fail. So with just weeks to go, we kicked off a last ditch intensive campaign to get community support and convince the Church authorities of the importance of protecting and celebrating Colombia’s national tree - the wax palm.

With the support of Conservation International, we embarked on a national and regional publicity campaign which included radio broadcasts, TV presentations and adverts, and national and international newspaper articles. The campaign captivated national attention, and even spread internationally. But the fruits of working and acting locally proved critical, especially with the children of the “Friends of Nature” group who undertook numerous community awareness tasks, from distributing palm and parrot posters to musical concerts and theatre productions.

Educating the local police to the issues and problems was successful as they actively monitored the situation and informed all that they would enforce a ban on cutting down wax palms. Also, the regional environmental agency CorAntioquia greatly supported our efforts by paying 15 men, who normally cut down and sold wax palms for Palm Sunday, to plant wax palm seedlings across the parrots’ foraging range for one week.

With days to go before Palm Sunday and with overwhelming community support for the campaign, the Catholic Church, particularly led by the Priest Mario Agudelo, decided to actively support alternatives to cutting down wax palms for the procession. With the Church’s blessing, we provided over 2,500 balloons, 2,000 tree branches (from coffee plants, eucalyptus and pine trees), and some 500 palm fronds from abundant lowland species. However, the most popular alternative was 600 wax palm seedlings in soil bags given as gifts for people to plant at home afterwards.

On March 24 2002, double the number of people participated in the Palm Sunday procession, especially more children. Yet not a single cut wax palm frond could be found in the procession of 5,000 people! A triumph for the wax palm, for the Yellow-eared Parrot and for the Catholic Church, plus 600 new palm recruits in the town from the seedlings and many more planted in the countryside. Palm Sunday this year was a fine day to celebrate!

Thanks to the long-term support of Fundación Loro Parque in the Western Andes and to new supporters like World Parrot Trust member Susanne Shrader and the American Bird Conservancy to help us build a safer future for the Yellow-eared Parrot. Your contribution would also make a difference, so please help now.

For further information about the Yellow-eared Parrot or for details on how you can help support this project, contact Paul via Email: salaman@ognorhynchus.com or Web: www.ognorhynchus.com