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LAGUNA DE SONSO

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WILDLIFE RESERVE

(Valle del Cauca Department, Colombia S.A.)

When F. Carlos Lehmann in 1940 started studying the wildfowl life of this marsh, he became interested in the preservation of this area for a "Sanctuary" in order to save waterbirds of the paradisiacal plateau of the rich Valle del Cauca. He fully realized that this region was beginning to develop into an important agricultural center which in time will use all of the flat land of the Plateau. He therefore proposed to the then Secretary of Agriculture of the Department called 'Valle del Cauca' (valley of the Cauca river), Dr. Giro Moline, a man of great vision for the future benefit of his country, to set aside this marsh as a sanctuary. At that time this was not possible. However, at the insistent requests of Dr. F.C. Lehmann, some fifteen years later, this entire area was closed for hunting. Again later, in the early sixtieth, Lehmann obtained from the State Government to establish this area as a Sanctuary. Shortly afterwards, and in view of the pressure exercised by the neighbouring landowners on the development governmental agency C.V.C., the State Legislature declared it an inviolable Wildlife Sanctuary and thus, in spite of many pressures, it has survived as a reserve. The opponents had wanted that C.V.C. (Corporación Autonoma Regional del Cauca) should undertake the drying of the marsh for agricultural purposes, including this area also in the land-reclaiming projects of C.V.C., which eventually will finish with the few remaining smaller marshes in the plateau of the Vall

There were several meetings among people concerned and government and scientific institutions - University of Valle, Valle State Museum of Natural History, Secretary of Agriculture -, and these institutions obtained that the marsh would be kept as it was, although reducing somewhat its extension.

More recently, the C.V.C. is becoming aware of the importance of this marsh, not so much as a wildlife refuge, but as a buffer area, to divert some of the water of the Cauca River, during the rainy season, when the river bed can not contain all the water, because of sedimentation caused by the deforestation of the very steep mountains on

the upper course of the river. This has helped the interests of the conservationists.

The "Laguna de Sonso" is very important from conservation standpoint, because several interesting birds live there: the endemic race of the Cinnamon Teal Anas cyanoptera tropicus, as far as it is known now, inhabits only the Valle del Cauca Plateau, and since all or most of the other marshes left there will be desiccated, the Laguna de Sonso will be the only refuge for the survival of this, the largest of the cinnamon teals. In this marsh habitat live also the only known horned screamers west of the Andes in Colombia. Furthermore this will be a place where future generations living in this area will be able to see some of the wonderful wildlife of the valley, since many more birds and mammals can find a refuge here and it also provides food and protection for several migrants from North America.

The project is to restore the lake to its primitive condition as much as possible, rebuilding the forest that once surrounded it. Some birds like Moscovy Ducks, Tree Ducks, Masked Ducks, and mammals like Capibaras, etc., might survive here.

Unfortunately, last summer, an enthusiastic government officer lacking ecological and biological knowledge, had the lake cleared of its aquatic vegetation, so as to make it more suitable for fishermen to net all fish living there, which endangered the wildfowl and other animals, for lack of the protection of their feeding and nesting grounds. Further, in consideration of the approaching hunting season, the birds would go elsewhere for food and could be shot.

On a trip flying to Bogotá, Dr. F. Carlos Lehmann discovered this mistake from the plane and upon his return to Cali, he immediately called the attention of the C.V.C. officers in charge of the management of the "Laguna de Sonso Reserve". They insisted that nothing had happened and invited Dr. Lehmann to visit the lake, which he accepted at once, only to prove that his concern was right. He asked the officer in charge to double, or treble the number of the wardens, fearing for poaching as a result of the lake's clearing. One week later, somebody brought to the Valle State Museum of Natural History in Cali a wounded Horned Screamer shot at the Laguna, which could not be nursed

back to life, in spite of all the efforts of the Museum staff to save it. In Cali, we saw the mounted bird in the exhibits of the Valle State Museum of Natural History, with the indication on the label that it had been shot illegally.

We hope the Colombian conservationists can gain more influence, and that some of them having good knowledge of ecology and biology should be consulted before taking actions like the preceding one that proved so dangerous to the preservation of important species.

The few people who are working for serious conservation in Latin America should be given all possible assistance by the important international organizations interested in helping to preserve the earth's natural resources while there is still time.