

Off the coast of Peru vast numbers of sea-birds feed on the abundant anchovy populations. Peruvians since the age of the Incas have mined the opulent stores of guano the birds deposit. The most productive sites are islands off the Paracas Peninsula where cormorants, pelicans, and gannets congregate.

Condors, turkey vultures, and gulls feed on these birds when they die. Condors also have been seen eating eggs and nestlings of cormorants. When the great vultures fly over, hysteria erupts and many eggs are broken inadvertently by the parent guano birds themselves. However, an ecological study set up with the help of Dr. J. J. Hickey, who visited us from the University of Wisconsin for a week, argues that the condors pose no major threat to the guano birds.

Methodically during a six-month period Libby and I counted condors and made a food survey along 40 kilometers of coastline. We found that although condor diets often include dead birds, porpoises, and sea turtles, the primary food was sea lions--dead adults washed up on beaches or young animals that had died on the birthing grounds. The number of condors appeared to be related to the number of sea lions available as food.

Peru's Servicio Nacional de Fertilizantes, a nationalized organization that mines the fertilizer deposits, conducts annual hunts for guano bird predators--Peruvian gulls, kelp gulls, and condors. Thousands of gulls have been killed but still they maintain sizeable populations. Condors, on the other hand, steadily decrease in numbers. Libby and I went to Santa Rosa Island to see a condor hunt one spring.

Maximiliano Ormeno, the Servicio's guardian on Santa Rosa, is a likeable man who enjoys his lonely job. When he asked why we were studying condors I told him about our interest in endangered species. I mentioned that in the United States only about 50 California condors remained.

"Fifty!" he exclaimed. "Why, I kill that many every year." He was proud.

"Do condors still get eggs and nestlings on your island?" I asked.

"No, there have been no condors on Santa Rosa for six or seven years. I go to the mainland to shoot them".

"If they don't bother your birds here, why do you shoot them?"

"Well, I don't want them to start again.

But more important, condors are all I can get. See that island? The guardian there gets thousands of gulls. There are no gulls here. When the Servicio's biologist comes I would have nothing to show for my work unless I went after the condors."

On a trip to the mainland the guardian killed a number of sea lions and left them for bait. At dawn a day later we struck off with him on a windy sea. We crossed, landed, and hiked for two hours to sandy cliffs near the baited area. Suddenly the guardian crouched, and crept to the cliff edge. Libby and I followed. Below us two adult condors, a male and a female, stood together, wings touching.

The guardian lifted his gun. At the movement the male bird cocked his head. The gun went off. Hit, the female flapped clumsily away. I saw him struggle toward a rock through a mass of kelp. Then a wave washed over him and he disappeared.

One shot, one condor. I saw nine hit that day.

Another Peruvian event takes the lives of 10 to 15 condors a year in bizarre public executions held each February. Near the end of our field work Libby and I drove north into the mountains to the Callejón de Huaylas to view these rites.



We had to hike seven miles to reach the village of Cashapampa, where an arranque del condor was to occur. We arrived a bit early, and met an American missionary who talked with us about the fiesta.

"The condor is trapped on the puna," he said.

"Men waiting in a covered pit reach through a fist-size opening to grab by the leg any condor attracted to the bait. Comrades nearby then rush up to complete the capture."

While we talked men finished an arch of poles. They tied fruits, presents, and bottles of chicha to one end of a rope which ran through a pulley at the top of the arch.

Later the condor would be suspended from the same rope, and blows rained on him.

"Some people believe this celebration is a form of the cortamonte", our friend said.

"Isn't that where they dance around a tree decorated with gifts and fruits and chop at it until it falls?" Libby asked.

"That's right," the missionary said. "Apparently this fiesta came with the Spanish. In Spain it symbolized destruction of the pagan god that resided in the tree. To destroy the pagan god of the Incas they beat a condor to death instead of chopping down a tree. But for most people here time has erased the ceremony's origin and meaning."

A long file of horsemen had entered the arena, preceded by a band playing quenpas and drums. I noted that all the riders were mestizos, the lighter skins of their mixed ancestry a sharp contrast to the deep bronze of the musicians or the spectators on the hillside. Now the mounted villagers began to gallop through the arch, grabbing at the objects tied to the rope. An individual on foot jerked at the rope's opposite end, trying to snatch the prizes out of reach at the last moment. Shouts from the crowd greeted any successful grab.

"Here comes the condor! " Libby cried.

Two men rode into the arena, each holding the condor by a wing. They tied his shoulders to the end of the rope where the objects had been. Then they released the bird. He tried to flap skyward.

Riders began circling through the arch again, this time flailing at the great bird with their fists. At first his flapping, and tugs on the rope, kept all but a few from striking him. But as he became exhausted, and the pace of the circling increased, more and more blows fell true. Clouds of dust hid the mounting frenzy as rider after rider pummeled the spinning mass of feathers until the condor was dead.

A knot of horsemen gathered beneath the arch. One of them pressed his mouth to the condor's gaping beak. With his teeth he ripped out the condor's tongue. Next year this man would command the team sent to catch another condor.

Dazed by the savagery, Libby and I were silent as we headed down the valley trail. My thoughts wandered. I remembered the condor designs painted on the delicate bowls we had seen in the Paracas museums. The thought that rocky trail in the Peruvian evening it seemed to me, as it does now, that until the condor can evoke in modern man the kind of emotion known to those ancient artist the future of this colossal Andean is seriously imperiled.