

Venezuela: Yurubí National Park

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Date of most recent on-site evaluation: April 2001

Date posted: October 2001

Location: Sierra de Aroa Mountain Range in Yaracuy State

Year created: 1960

Area: 23,670 ha

Ecoregion: Cordillera de la Costa Montane Forest

Habitat: Cloud forest, rain forest, dry semi-deciduous forest



Summary

Description

Yurubí National Park was created to protect the watershed of the Yurubí River, which serves as the fresh water source for the city of San Felipe. Yurubí National Park is located in the Sierra de Aroa Mountains. The park includes cloud forests and low montane forest and is surrounded by agricultural areas. Although Yurubí is one of the best-preserved montane forest national parks, it is practically unknown to Venezuelans, including the people who live in its immediate surrounding areas. Only a few trails cross through the park that are used primarily by illegal hunters or by the small number of guests that visit the park for research or recreational purposes. There are no inhabitants inside the park; prior occupants were relocated several years ago. Overall, Yurubí has been well preserved.

Biodiversity

Because of its geographic location, one might expect a high level of biodiversity and endemism in Yurubí National Park; however, there have been very little research conducted and information on this subject is extremely limited. 68 bird species have been documented within the park.

Threats

Yurubí is one of the best-preserved parks in Venezuela. However, it is considered [vulnerable](#) because threats such as fire, poaching, and human encroachment do exist. Although immediate conservation measures are not needed at this time, monitoring is necessary to ensure the protection and maintenance of its biological diversity in the near future. Without proper infrastructure and enforcement these threats could grow to pose serious problems for the park's biological integrity in the coming decade.

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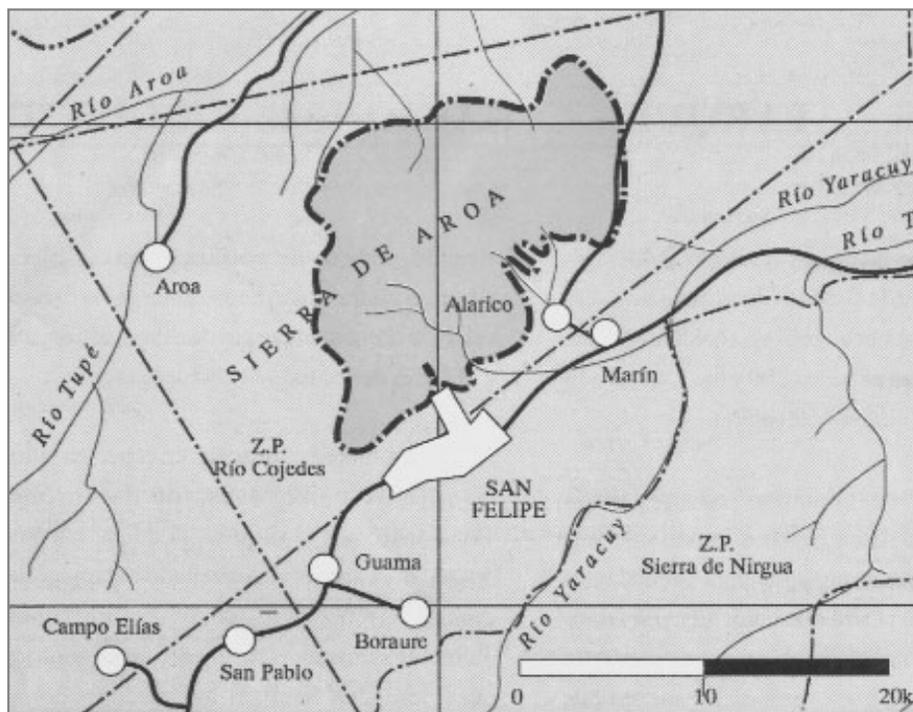
View of Yurubí National Park

Description

Physical Description

Yurubí National Park is located in Sierra de Aroa Mountains, the northwestern extension of Cordillera de la Costa range. The northern slopes appear suddenly out from the flatlands, Valles Marítimos Occidentales, creating breathtaking scenery. Because of the flatlands proximity to the Caribbean Sea, and the absence of any obstacle between the sea and the mountains, the strong moist Caribbean winds reach and penetrate the park. This creates ideal conditions for Yurubí's wet montane forest and rain forest habitats, even under 1,800 m, the altitude usually required for such habitats. The southern face of the mountain is more steeply sloped than the northern. The city of San Felipe, which is the capital of Yaracuy State, borders the southern slope. The average rainfall is 1580 mm per year; annual mean temperature is 26.5 °C.

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Map of Yurubí National Park

Biodiversity

Because of its geographic location, one might expect a high level of biodiversity and endemism in Yurubí National Park; however, the information on this subject is extremely limited. There have been some unpublished entomological inventories made by researchers from the Universidad de los Andes (ULA), and a partial inventory of birds in the Leonor Bernabó recreational area, completed by Jimenez in 1988. He reported 68 bird species for that area, and made the first record of a guácharo colony (*Steatornis caripensis*) in Yaracuy. The colony lives in a cave located in the northern slope of the park. Further research on biodiversity of Yurubí is essential.

Management

INPARQUES, the official institute that regulates and manages Venezuela's national parks, wrote the management plan in 1992. The plan covers park regulations and defines seven different management zones within the park area, each with specific legal uses. They are:

- **Integral Protection Zone:** Access restricted to INPARQUES personnel for monitoring or scientific research.
- **Wild and Pristine Zone:** Restricted access, devoted to research, monitoring and educational activities. Access is granted only under INPARQUES supervision.
- **Management Zone:** Legal uses are low-impact recreation, educational activities, and camping.
- **Natural Recovery Zone:** Areas that are being rehabilitated after human impact.
- **Leisure zone:** Open to the public for recreation.
- **Service Zone:** It is defined as the place for services and building construction, but until this moment contains only roads.
- **Historical, Cultural and Paleontological Interest Zone:** This zone contains all historical

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structures, historic cocoa farms, and other important cultural features such as petroglyphs.

The management plan also specifies the forbidden, permitted and regulated activities in each of these areas and defines biological, historical, socio-economic, cultural, and scenically important areas that are priorities for conservation. These include the habitats of some animal and plant species and ruins of ancient agricultural farms. The socio-economic resources of the park are defined as the water supply potential and recreation and tourism potential.

INPARQUES rangers are in charge of vigilance and enforcement of park regulations. There are of 13 rangers working without any ranger stations, all of them meet at the park headquarters. In addition to rangers, there is one superintendent and an environmental education manager working for Yurubí National Park.

Human Influence

At present there are no human inhabitants within the park borders. The former occupants, most of whom were small-scale farmers, were relocated in 1985. The state bought their properties and gave them another plot of land outside the park limits. There are several towns along the park boundaries, but apparently there is a very low risk of penetration because of several factors. On the northern slope, the main road is separated from the park by at least 60 km and the area between the road and the park is scarcely populated. The southern areas of the park may be most prone to human invasion because of the close proximity of the cities of San Felipe, Marín and Albarico. In this zone, there are several cattle and agricultural farms between the road and the park. Additionally, there is an agriculture school in the area. Fortunately, at this time the cattle and agricultural farmers do not seem interested in the park's sloped forest adjacent to their proprieties, but occasional fires produced by the farmers on their land could be a potential threat to the park.



Cattle farms along the border of Yurubí National Park

There are no roads that pass through the park. The road from San Felipe to Aroa, which links the southern and northern slope of the park, surrounds the park and is far from the park limits. Access to the park is only possible through San Felipe and the main road. Fortunately, because no other large cities or commercial areas exist in the surrounding areas of the park, the traffic along this main road is light.

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Most of the visitors to Yurubí are the people from San Felipe. They have typically concentrated their visits in two recreational areas. The first is Leonor Bernabó Recreational Area. Leonor Bernabó has a swimming pool and is used for recreational and educational purposes. The pool is managed by private concession. Users pay a fee of 1,000 Bolivares (about US \$1.35 , September 2001) per person. There are approximately 300 visitors each weekend. The second recreational area, Guayabita, has been completely abandoned. Since December 1999, it has not been maintained. ParksWatch-Venezuela visited this area in April 2001 and verified it has excellent potential for recreational and educational purposes but the infrastructure needs to be improved.



Guayabita Recreational Area. The ranger station and the facilities for visitors were abandoned in 1999. Access to the area is now prohibited.

Conservation and Research

As has been demonstrated in this report, there is a lack of scientific research and conservation activity. Apart of the mentioned inventories, some other research projects include an evaluation of the watershed of Yurubí River and some research in park management and design (this has been carried out mainly by students). Carlsen (1999) cited just five research works in three topics: ornithology, management and forestry. There is no research being conducted at this time in Yurubí National Park. There is only one group (Campamento Ecológico Charagüaray) that is beginning to work on conservation activities.

Threats

Threats to Yurubí include:

- o Hunting and poaching
- o Fire
- o Absence of appropriate infrastructure
- o Lack of qualified personnel
- o Human colonization
- o Lack of public support

Hunting and Poaching

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Illegal hunting is common mainly in the northern sector of the park. Most of the trails inside of the park were initially created by hunters and later were discovered by the rangers. Both the lack of vigilance and the absence of ranger stations make controlling illegal hunters difficult. The National Guard, which is responsible for law enforcement, has not collaborated with INPARQUES. The few times hunters have been caught in the act, the INPARQUES rangers confiscated the guns and turned the hunters over to the National Guard. Unfortunately, after the National Guard released the hunters, they were found again a few days later hunting inside the park with the same guns. The superintendent of Yurubí, has denounced the National Guard's lack of collaboration; however, he told ParksWatch-Venezuela that the new INPARQUES regional director, Colonel Eduardo Nieves, is working to develop collaborative vigilance programs between National Guard and INPARQUES. Colonel Eduardo Nieves is a retired National Guard officer.

The intensity of the hunting activity is qualitative; there is no data available. Neither the frequency of this activity nor which species are being hunted is known.

Hunting is not only for alimentary purposes. In a private recreational park close to San Felipe, we observed caged wild species. The assumption is that these animals were caught in Yurubí National Park. There were two agouties (*Dasyprocta leporina*), two collared peccaries (*Tayassu tajacu*) and two yellow-knobbed curassows (*Crax daubentoni*).

Illegal bird trafficking is a threat to the avian populations living in Yurubí National Park. On the road to San Felipe, ParksWatch-Venezuela observed three different men selling parrots to drivers. Parrot trafficking is a common occurrence in the area. It has been denounced several times to the National Guard by conservationist NGOs and some local people,, but it has not lessened the activity.

Fire

Fire in Yurubí is not as problematic as in other Venezuelan parks, but it is a common event on the southern slope. This slope of the park is drier and is bordered by several villages, towns, a few private plantations and agriculture lands. This makes the southern slope more fire prone than the rest of the park. Although park headquarters is located in this fire prone area, the absence of continual monitoring and the lack of economic and human resources makes it virtually impossible to combat fires effectively. Yurubí National Park does not employ specialized personnel to combat forest fires; instead they depend on a few volunteers and the rangers. The ability to combat fires needs to be enhanced.

In 2001, 400 ha of forest burned in Yurubí. That is twice the amount of hectares burned in 2000. During 1988, data indicates that fires destroyed more than 600 hectares of forest (Marante, 1989).



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After a fire along the road to Aroa

Absence of appropriate infrastructure

The only infrastructure is the park headquarters office and two recreational areas -one of them abandoned. The park headquarters does not have any mode of communication; there are no radios or telephone. There are no additional ranger stations, so the 13 rangers who work at Yurubí spend most of their day around the headquarters, which is located inside the Leonor Bernabó Recreational Area. On a daily basis, one or two of the rangers travel to other sections of the park via motorcycle to monitor activities. But overall ranger activities are very limited because of the lack of ranger stations. Additionally, no information centers, fire prevention towers or fire department exist in the park.

Boundaries of the park are defined cartographically but are not fenced and are not regularly marked by signs. ParksWatch-Venezuela found only two signs along its perimeter. The geography naturally defines the border of the park because of the contrast between the flatlands outside and the sloped land inside the park.

Lack of qualified personnel

There are 13 rangers in Yurubí. Two of the experienced rangers are reaching retirement age and perform a limited scope of ranger duties. One ranger just retired after 27 years working at Yurubí National Park, he remains at the park as a volunteer. Among the other rangers, just one of them has worked at INPARQUES for a significant period of time (22 years); the rest have had five years or less experience working as rangers. INPARQUES has not developed a ranger training strategy. This is a future threat for the entire national parks system. Most of the recently hired personnel at Yurubí Park have no training at all as rangers and even violate some of the park regulations. For example, ParksWatch-Venezuela observed several rangers drinking alcoholic beverages inside the recreational area. Some of the rangers were not dressed in distinctive ranger uniforms and it was difficult to differentiate them from the visitors because of their unprofessional attitudes. Fortunately, INPARQUES has recognized this problem and has begun to consider the creation of a training school for rangers. Lack of governmental support also adds to the problem of employing qualified personnel. Recently (April 2001), the rangers of all national parks threatened to strike. The reason for the strike: they had not been paid their salaries since January 2000. The Yurubí Rangers also participated in this movement. The strike was eventually avoided because INPARQUES offered a new contract deal. These types of problems discourage qualified people from pursuing careers as rangers and threaten the livelihood of the existing rangers.

Human colonization

Even though all the prior occupants of the park were relocated and there are currently no inhabitants inside the park, some of the border is under pressure for agricultural use. This is part of a recent social phenomenon indirectly promoted by the president of Venezuela, which has caused invasions in other national parks. This situation has affected Henri Pittier National Park and might affect Yurubí. Potential invaders are mainly farmers who want to extend their properties by taking public or private lands that they considered abandoned. Fortunately, in recent discussions with one of the rangers, the local farmers indicated that they do not intend to settle in Yurubí, yet pressure

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does exist and future colonization may occur. Without the support of the National Guard and with the President's encouragement, it will be difficult for the rangers of Yurubí National Park to stop any colonization attempts.

Lack of public support

During ParksWatch's visit to Yurubí we realized that the local people are unaware that this is a national park. Interviews conducted with inhabitants of the nearby towns of Albarico, Marín and San Felipe confirmed this. People are aware of Leonor Bernabó Recreational Area, but they do not know that it is part of a national park.

As mentioned previously, there is almost a complete lack of scientific research. Because of this lack of information and lack of knowledge, the public is not concerned with the fate of the park and certainly does not support or participate in conservation initiatives.

Additionally, there are no NGOs working in the park. A group of young people from San Felipe, Campamento Ecológico Charagüaray, has developed interest in the conservation of the recreational areas, but this group feels that there is a lack of collaboration from the superintendent of the park. Currently, there are two opposing philosophies regarding the use of the park. The first philosophy (which is the view of the superintendent of Yurubí) is that the park should be "untouched" and the park should not be promoted for use in order to preserve it. This might have been a good strategy during the first years of the park, but now it poses a threat to the future of the park. The other philosophy is to promote the park to the local people so that they will want to support conservation efforts and will be concerned with the fate of the park.

Recommended Solutions

Fire

INPARQUES capability to prevent and combat forest fires needs to be enhanced. One possibility is to build on the experience of the Pajaritos Fire Combat Camp at El Ávila National Park. Pajaritos consists of a small core of professional fire fighters as part of park staff, a large network of trained volunteers for ad hoc search and rescue operations, and a rapid response capability based on effective communications, transport, and fire fighting equipment. During the wet season, personnel focus their efforts in preparing and implementing fire prevention plans and educational programs. Part of the success of Pajaritos fire program is due to the public support and the large interest in El Ávila National Park. Many types of people, including researchers, trekkers, day-to-day visitors and investors use El Ávila and therefore want to collaborate and support ideas and actions directed to preserve the park. INPARQUES must urgently promote Yurubí National Park to the community to gain the support necessary for this type of fire prevention program.

Absence of infrastructure and lack of qualified personnel

Many of the threats to Yurubí National Park would be lessened with appropriate infrastructure and personnel. The absence of ranger stations clearly limits the effectiveness of vigilant activities. Due to its size, Yurubí National Park should have at least four ranger stations, and the Guayabita Recreational Area should be restored and functional. Additionally, ParksWatch-Venezuela

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recommends at least three towers for fire monitoring (to be built on the highest points in the park) plus a fire combat base camp. INPARQUES should implement a ranger training school and the government should guarantee the salaries of the rangers. Money for the construction of a fire combat camp, fire prevention study and an ecological and social rapid assessment study has been appropriated by the World Bank in the INPARQUES Project signed by INPARQUES in 1995. Nevertheless, this money has not yet been used for Yurubí. These projects, which have already been approved for Yurubí, need to be implemented. This would be one step in improving the infrastructure as well as improving the scientific information available on the park.

Human colonization

Rangers have already been discouraging potential settlers by informing them of the park limits and by advising them that there are negative consequences of taking national park land. Even though the potential invaders have been receptive and do not seem interested to invade Yurubí, INPARQUES should take necessary precautions. This includes soliciting support from the National Guard if any colonization does occur. In addition, INPARQUES should protect the rangers against potential aggressors, also by collaborating with the National Guard.

Lack of public support

INPARQUES should work to enhance public awareness in order to increase public support. The Yurubí Superintendent should publicize the park among the communities of San Felipe, Corcorote, Albarico, and Marin. Personnel from INPARQUES should go to these towns to present educational workshops. The Superintendent should use the media to inform the public about the park and advise them of its legal uses.

Environmental education activities should be formally incorporated into the educational curriculum of community schools. Additionally, within the park, environmental education needs to be enhanced. The educator is currently working to develop new programs, such as guided tours into the park. The entire park staff needs to support such initiatives.

The superintendent and the rangers need to promote and support initiatives of voluntary users who want to develop activities into the park, within the limits imposed by the management plan. A new ecological-interested excursionist group-*Campamento Ecológico Charagüaray*- is being formed in San Felipe. They would like to participate in education campaigns informing the public of the legal uses of the park and they would also like to promote cleaning campaigns in the recreational areas.

INPARQUES should also promote scientific research in the park in order to gain more information and to gain support from the scientific community.

Conclusion

Yurubí National Park is one of the most well preserved parks of the Venezuelan park system. The human resettlement program carried out by INPARQUES 16 years ago has certainly contributed to park's preserved state. Nevertheless, the park is being threatened by several problems like illegal hunting, forest fires and potential invasions. Sufficient park infrastructure and financial support would help ensure that these imminent threats are diminished. In order to ensure the future of

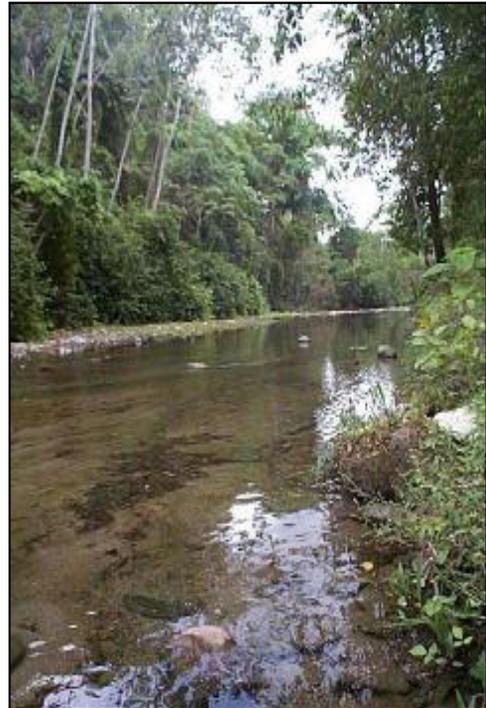
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Yurubí, a long-term goal must be strengthening the relationship between the adjacent communities and the park. Future threats to the park will be avoided only when people will recognize the true value of the park.



Top Photo: Western border, looking North

Right Photo: Stream running close to the abandoned recreation area, Yurubi National Park, Los Guayabitos, Venezuela



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