EMBAJADORES DEL ORINOCO NEWSLETTER # 2

(October 2024)

Welcome to our **second newsletter!** Our initiative to bring you closer to what is happening in the Venezuelan Amazon Rainforest. We select the most relevant news and reports in English and Spanish and include our own content in English to help you stay updated.

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- **Did you miss it?** On 3 May we participated in an event organized by Apevex about “Journalism and the Environment”. Contact us to receive the recorded event.

- **Casserite (conflict mineral) exports to China and other BRIC countries**

Maduro's regime completed internal processes in October formalizing the exploitation of Casserite (the chief ore mineral used to produce tin) in the Arco Minero del Orinoco area destined for export to China and other BRIC countries.

The Regime openly ackowledges having dispatched already 833 tons of the mineral this year. There is no control over these illegal transactions or the corresponding revenues.

https://eldiariodeguayana.com.ve/gobierno-autoriza-derechos-para-explotacion-del-mineral-casiterita-en-municipios-del-estado-bolivar/

- **Venezuela still refusing to sign the Escazu Agreement**

Venezuela continues to lag behind when it comes to effectively protecting environmental human rights. Check this link (Spanish) where **Clima 21** reminds us that Venezuela is one of the few countries in the region not having yet signed this important agreement promoting open participation on environmental issues and protecting environmental defenders, including indigenous people: https://clima21.net/noticias/venezuela-tambien-debe-garantizar-un-entorno-seguro-para-los-defensores-de-los-derechos-humanos-ambientales/

As a reminder, this agreement, first of its kind, was signed in Costa Rica on 4 March 2018 and entered into force on 21 April 2021. Unfortunately, Venezuela has repeteadly refused to participate since the beginning without providing any official explanation.

- **Norwegian journalists (NRK) show what illegal mining is doing to Yanomami communities**

This journalism piece (in Norwegian), about the gold rush in the Amazon Rainforest explains the destruction caused by illegal mining and the dire situation of Yanomami communities in Brazil and Venezuela: Gullets forbannelse – NRK Norge – Oversikt over nyheter fra ulike deler av lander.

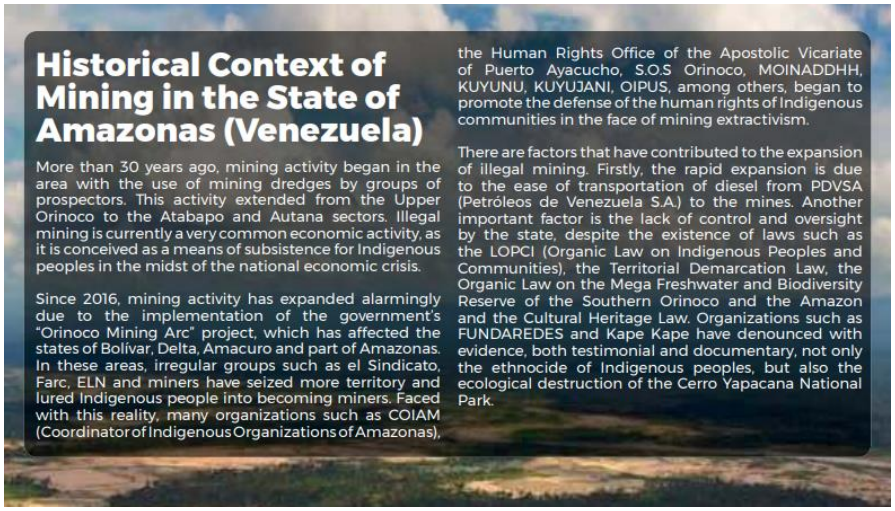
"The lives of Yanomami are heavily impacted by illegal mining"

"This has been a fiasco. Mining is happening freely in Yanomami areas – says Dario Kopenawa, vice-president of indigenous organization Hutukara"

«Gullets forbannelse- Brasils kamp mot de ulovlige gullgruvene» (Inger Marit Kolstadbråten & Cicilia Sigrid Andersen)

- **REPAM issued their third Report about human rights violations in the Amazon**

Check Page 66 of this Report for an overview of human rights violations in the Venezuelan Amazon region, and particularly in Yapacana National Park. Some of our allies and local leaders contributed with the Venezuelan sections. INFORME_REPAM_ENG_00F.indd



- **“Amazon underground” receives 2024 Digital Media Award**

“Amazon underground”, an ambitious cross border project of investigative journalism focusing on criminal activities in the Amazon rainforest received the 2024 Digital Media Awards in the category “Best Digital Journalism Project”. This work is a **must read** by anyone interested on the **illicit and criminal activities impacting the Amazon Rainforest**.

The project, led by Dutch Journalist **Bram Ebus** involved 37 journalists and 11 media professionals. It is a collaborative effort of **Armando Info** (Venezuela), **La Liga Contra el Silencio** (Colombia) e **InfoAmazonia** (Brazil) and has been referenced in The New York Times, El Pais, CNN and other large media outlets. You can access it here: Amazon Underworld

- **Turkey signs deal to exploit gold in Venezuela’s Arco Minero del Orinoco**

Despite the efforts of many organizations (including our network) denouncing the ecocide caused by illegal mining in the Venezuelan Amazon Rainforest, the Venezuelan regime signed an Agreement with Turkey in June allowing the latter to exploit gold in the Arco Minero zone. This is one of 3 agreements involving also ammonia and gas. Both governments had agreed in February to increase their commercial exchange from USD 800 million last year to USD 3 billion.

More info here: https://www.breitbart.com/latin-america/2024/06/10/turkey-signs-deal-to-exploit-land-in-venezuelas-ravaged-gold-mining-region/

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro (R) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) are pictured at Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas, Venezuela, on December 3, 2018. (YURI CORTEZ/AFP/Getty Images)

❖ The dangerous life of conservationists in Latin America

"In Venezuela, speaking out against Nicolás Maduro, who has served as president since 2013, can bring severe consequences, Nahon-Serfaty claimed". "Virgilio Trujillo Arana, a 38-year-old Indigenous Uwottuja man who had spoken out against illegal mining in the Venezuelan Amazon, was fatally shot in 2022. While unsolved, the murder was seen as an attempt to silence those who demonstrate against Maduro's agenda, Nahon-Serfaty said". Read the full article here: https://abcnews.go.com/US/conservationists-persist-latin-america-despite-political-challenges-experts/story?id=113619883

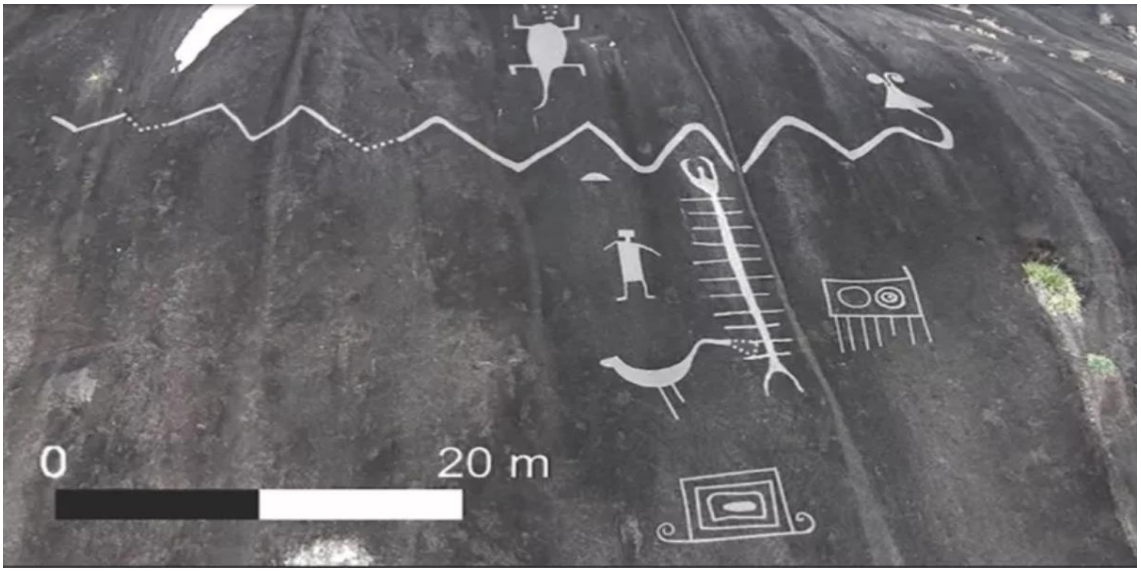
❖ Mining tragedies in the Imataca Natural Reserve and Maniapare

On 23 May, Illegal mining in the Imataca Natural Reserve took the life of 4 persons evidencing once more that: 1- The Venezuelan State continues to promote illegal mining even in protected areas; and 2- The state cares very little about the working conditions or safety of the miners, whom they exploit, and from whose activities they profit. This happened after a tragedy that took place only a few days before leaving 2 dead in Maniapare (Amazon state); and adds to the 16 miners who lost their lives earlier this year in the Bulla Loca mining site (Bolivar state) mentioned in our Newsletter #1.

❖ Scientists impressed with Petroglyphs along the Orinoco River

Several recent publications have featured some of the oldest and largest petroglyphs (rock engravings) in the world after several scientists visited some sites along the Orinoco River. Although the sites have been known and studied by Venezuelans for years, new engravings have ignited a new interest. Read more about this fascinating form of ancient art here: Mysterious Symbols on 4,000-Year-Old Rock Art Hint at an Unknown Culture : ScienceAlert

The below picture shows a famous engraving in Venezuela's Cerro Pintado (Bolivar State)



A rock panel from the Orinoco River region featuring many engravings, including a roughly 140-foot-long snake. A study has revealed new insights into the rock art in the region. **RIRIS ET AL., ANTIQUITY 2024**

❖ Jaguar conservation project and exports of Venezuelan Morrocoyes

The last issue of Biodiversity Mag has interesting perspectives about wildlife and conservation efforts around the world. As co-founders of the **International Conservation and Biodiversity** Team, we are glad to have two entries on Venezuela. One highlights the jaguar conservation work of **Project Sebraba**; in the other one, **Armando Info** investigates the export of thousands of Venezuelan morrocoyes by shady entities. Check the whole issue here: [Biodiversity MAG 11 (flipbuilder.com)]

Maria Fernanda Puerto-Carillo

María Fernanda Puerto Carillo is the director and founder of the Sebraba Project, which is dedicated to the study and conservation of wild felines in Venezuela. She studied ecology at the Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas (IVIC). She has been dedicated to the awareness and conservation of endangered wildlife species in the country, through research, environmental education and the development of conservation strategies that include the mitigation of feline-human conflicts, the educational programme 'On the trail of the jaguar' and the promotion of ecological corridors, among others. Her main work focuses on the conservation of the jaguar or Amazonian tiger (Panthera onca) in several areas of the country, for which she received the Future for Nature award in the Netherlands in 2020. María Fernanda is Venezuela's regional representative in the Wild Felid Monitor of the Wild Felid Research and Management Association of the United States, as well as an associate biologist in 'Operation Jaguar', a programme aimed at mitigating the illegal trafficking of jaguar parts and pieces from Latin America to the Asian continent, coordinated by the National Committee of the International Union for Conservation of Nature in the Netherlands (IUCN NL), and an associate biologist in the US-based NGO SPECIES.

Laurent Dingli. — Before talking about your NGO, I'd like to start by asking you about your passion for wildlife. Have you always had a special bond with animals and nature?

Maria Fernando Puerto Carillo. — Since I was a child, I've always had a very strong bond with nature; my family often took me on trips to the mountains and I think I've always had this connection with wildlife. Before I went to university, I was already travelling with people who were studying biology and working in related professions, and I was already involved in projects when I was very young. So I always knew that this was my field of work, something I was passionate about, and that's why, when I started studying biology, I focused on the study of wildlife in general right from the start of my career.

L. D. - Can you tell us how you founded Proyecto Sebraba?

M. P. C. — In 2007, when I was carrying out a conservation project, a study of population ecology, at the University of Zulia (LUZ), I discovered through a friend that there was a population of jaguars south of Lake Maracaibo, a very special area that had never been studied. It was then that I began to visit this region and understood the particular nature of the local jaguar population, which feeds on endemic species. I concentrated entirely on this site and the project was born. I called it Sebraba, after the name given to the jaguar by the local indigenous community, the Barís.

L. D. — Can you tell us about the jaguar, summarising its biological and ethological characteristics, its area of distribution on the continent and its importance for the ecosystems?

M. P. C. - The jaguar is the largest feline in the Americas. It is now considered extinct in the United States. Its current range extends from northern Mexico to northern Argentina. It is arguably the largest terrestrial predator in our ecosystems throughout its range.

The jaguar acts as an architect of ecosystems, helping to regulate the populations of other species, thus balancing the dynamics of its communities and maintaining the equilibrium of the ecosystem as a whole. And, of course, in the absence of the jaguar, herbivore populations can proliferate, leading to overgrazing of plants, the spread of disease and the disappearance of some other species. It has been shown that in the absence of large predators such as the jaguar there is an ecological imbalance, which is why these animals are so important to the ecosystems in which they live.

L. D. — To protect a species we need to have data and to know the size of the populations according to their area of distribution. This is a very difficult task, especially in Amazonia. I know that you often use camera traps for this purpose. What is the current state of our knowledge?

M. P. C. — Camera traps have been a very useful tool to study this kind of animals, which are quite elusive. It is very difficult to detect them with the naked eye, so studying these animals in their natural habitat is a bit complex. This tool gives us real-time data not only on the number of individuals that may inhabit a given area, but also gives us information on the reproductive methods of the females, the state of the population of young males, the sexual structure, the interspecific relationships between the jaguar and other felines that share or use the area in a similar way to the jaguar. This tool provides us with a great deal of information on a large number of species, but unfortunately there are large gaps in the data, not only in Venezuela but also at the international level, as it has not been possible to monitor and evaluate the populations of this feline in all its natural areas. Venezuela is a country where natural areas are very fragmented. For many decades much information has been published on the jaguar in Venezuela, but it has been very limited or circumscribed to the llanera region of the country, specifically to the states of Cojedes and Apure, while a large area has not been studied and very few studies have focused on other populations. However, these are very specific studies that do not give us a global vision of the status of the species.

Below: Agua Calientes, Mexico, 10 July 2016 © Proyecto Sebraba — All rights reserved.

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Click on the logo above to read the original article in Spanish

Lisseth Boon

Lisseth Boon is a Venezuelan investigative journalist with extensive experience in print and digital media in Venezuela and transnational collaborative projects.

For her investigations into corruption, organized crime, illegal mining, environmental crimes, and human rights violations, she has been recognized by the national investigative journalism award from the Press and Society Institute (Ipys Venezuela); the Javier Valdéz Latin American Conference of Investigative Journalism Award (Ipys/Colprin); the Gabo Prize for Ibero-American journalism; the Inter American Press Association (Sip) Award for Journalistic Excellence; and the Letisov Journalism Award.

Boon graduated from the Andrés Bello Catholic University and she has postgraduate studies from the Simón Bolívar University in Caracas and the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain.

Since April 2023, Boon has been part of the Armando.Info team, the only media dedicated to investigative journalism in Venezuela.

ORINOCO REPTILES' PECULIAR OPERATION MORROCOY

Behind the conservationist façade, this zoo markets thousands of red-footed tortoises from the Guyaiana Massif, south of Venezuela, with the authorization of the Ministry of Ecosocialism. For more than a decade, it has exported more than 200,000 to four continents, taking unconventional routes to satisfy the global demand for wildlife.

A woman and three men, their faces hidden behind caps and masks, hold two of a group of red-footed tortoises, morrocoyes sabaneros in spanish, savannah morrocoys (*Chelonoidis carbonaria*), each the size of a hand, arranged inside about twenty red plastic boxes, like those used to transport and store vegetables in markets. The image, taken in July 2020, shows a background of dense tropical foliage and accompanied the announcement of the release of 950 tortoises in the Los Caribes sector of the former Ilere municipality - today Angostura del Orinoco - in the state of Bolívar, very close to the capital, Ciudad Bolívar.

Along with delegates from the Ministry of Ecosocialism (Minec), and accompanied by members of the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) with the badge of the Environmental Guard, there were also representatives of Orinoco Reptiles C.A., the zoo in charge of the reproduction and conservation of the morrocoyes sabaneros reinserted that day in their natural habitat.

That public appearance of the company served to ratify its function of conservation and rescue of fauna, which by law must be fulfilled by zoos, zoos zoocriaderos (captive breeding farms), and aquariums authorized by the Minec in Venezuela. However, that same year, Orinoco Reptiles exported 14,136 morrocoyes sabaneros to four continents, according to the foreign trade platforms Importgenius, Panjiva and 52wmb.

David Marcos Valverde

Marcos Valverde is a Venezuelan journalist. He graduated from the Catholic University André Bello, Guayana, in 2010. From 2006 until 2019 he worked a reporter and editor for the newspaper Correo del Caroní. He worked as a regional correspondent for El Universal and Crónica Uno. Besides his journalistic work, Valverde is a university teacher since 2014. In June 2019, Valverde started working as a journalist for the investigative portal Armando Info.

Although Orinoco Reptiles faded from the environmental news after that good news, global statistics show that the company continued to operate. According to online records, the hatchery sold tens of thousands of tortoises to foreign customers in the shadow of its established mission. As exotic is the wildlife that travels in its shipments as the markets to which it ships. Between 2010 and 2023, it has exported more than 200,000 live savannah morrocoyes to countries such as the United States, Panama, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Italy, El Salvador, and Gambia. According to 52wmb, for example, between 2002 and 2023 it would have shipped some *44,2,000 morrocoyes* in 14 deliveries to Gambia, Costa Rica, and China alone.

Sustainable use?

Orinoco Reptiles, founded in Ciudad Bolívar as an anonymous company in the early years of chavismo, is part of a new generation of private zoos and zoo farms that have established alliances with the Minec for the conservation, rescue and sustainable use of wildlife. Despite the link with this portfolio, his name does not appear in the National Register of Contractors (RNC).

According to international trade databases, in 2021, the company's record year for exports, it took almost 64,400 specimens out of the country. That same year, it simultaneously participated in the II National Meeting of *Zoos, Zoos and Aquariums*, held during the pandemic at the Caricuao Zoo in Caracas, along with other similar companies such as *Inversiones Alazán GAC*, Criadero San Antonio Abad and Centro de Rescate y Recuperación de Fauna Silvestre Ebenezer, among others.

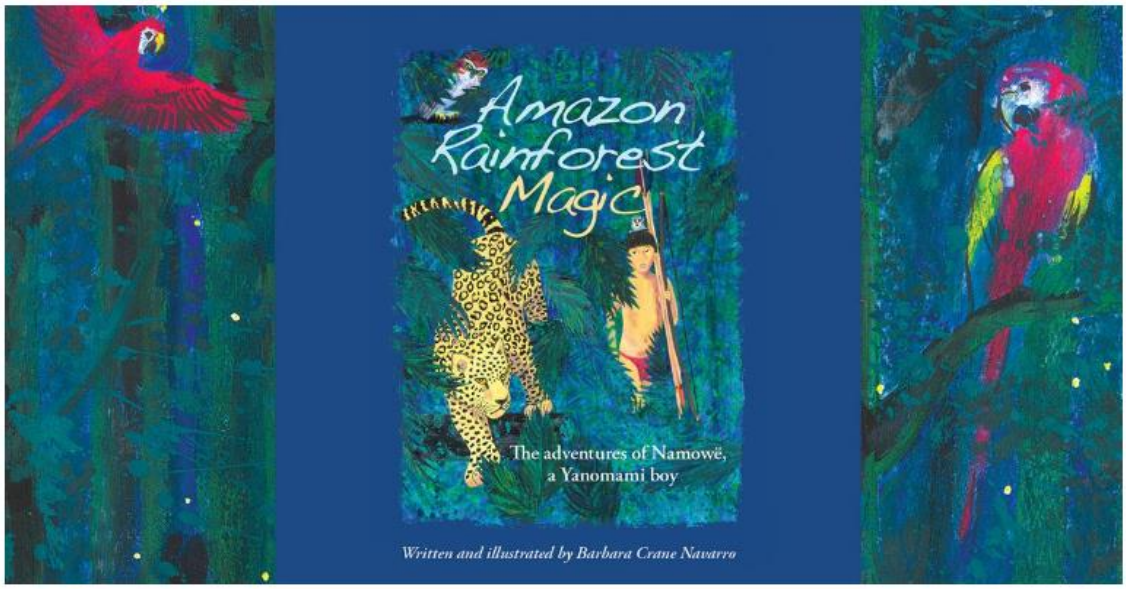
For two decades, Orinoco Reptiles has moved within the international commercialisation circuit of savannah morrocoyes that supplies the Asian market. Its operation, which must be authorized by the Minec, illustrates the business woven through unforeseen routes with a species of reptile that until the 1980s was in danger of extinction and that, today, is managed as a tradable commodity and forms part of the programmes for the sustainable use of wildlife.

In 2014, the owners of Orinoco Reptiles CA, husband and wife team Matías Rafael Yang Cermeño and Alejandra Uncein Salazar de Yang, opened Red Foot USA in Miami, which has served as an intermediary for overseas trade transactions. The company's name suggests the importance of the morrocoy in its catalogue of goods, as red foot tortoise is the colloquial name for this species in English. The incorporation of the company and its commercial activity coincided with the period when the economic sanctions imposed by the United States against the regime of Nicolás Maduro were coming into force.

The savannah morrocoy is a highly sought-after species on the international pet market, especially in Southeast Asian countries. China, for example, the world's largest consumer of wildlife, also uses preparations of this reptile for medicinal and edible purposes, and even as an aphrodisiac. In addition to the threats posed by logging and deforestation of the morrocoys' habitats, illegal hunting is now being added to supply these markets.

❖ Artivism

- This time we share the work of **Barbara Navarro** and her engaging Yanomami stories with enchanting illustration. This it is a great way to educate children about the Amazon Rainforest and the Yanomami culture: Engaging stories with enchanting illustrations! – « Amazon Rainforest Magic The adventures of Namowë, a Yanomami boy » and « Amazon Rainforest Magic The adventures of Meromi, a Yanomami girl » – For ages 8 to 12 to 100! – written and illustrated by Barbara Crane Navarro | Barbara Crane Navarro (barbara-navarro.com)



- **"El Salto de los Angeles"** (The leap of Angels) is a film about the adventures of a boy who sets up to search for his father who leaves him to work in the mines. The film shows incredible scenery and some wonderful landmarks in the Venezuelan Amazon Rainforest including Canaima National Park and our famous Angel Falls. You can see the official trailer here: Bing Videos

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We would love to hear from you! Reach out at: Emborinoco@gmail.com