

Colombia Confronts Drug Lord's Legacy: Hippos

Introduced to Colombia by the drug lord Pablo Escobar, the hippopotamus is prompting a debate over the containment of invasive species.

By Simon Romero from the New York Times
(www.nytimes.com/2009/09/11/world/americas/11hippo.html)



A tourist and his son visit a Montoya sculpture of *El Viejo*, the first hippopotamus Pablo Escobar brought to his luxurious retreat in Doradal, Colombia.



DORADAL, Colombia — Even in Colombia, a country known for its paramilitary death squads, this hunting party stood out: more than a dozen soldiers from a Colombian Army battalion, two Porsche salesmen armed with long-range rifles, their assistant, and a taxidermist.

Outrage ensued after the release of a photo of soldiers next to the carcass of Pepe, killed in Puerto Berrío. They stalked Pepe through the backlands of Colombia for three days in June before executing him in a clearing about 60 miles from here with shots to his head and heart. But after a snapshot emerged of soldiers posing over his carcass, the group suddenly found itself on the defensive.



As it turned out, Pepe — a hippopotamus who escaped from his birthplace near the pleasure palace built here by the slain drug lord Pablo Escobar — had a following of his own.

Colombian soldiers posed in June beside to a dead hippopotamus that had escaped from a ranch once owned by the drug lord Pablo Escobar.

The meticulously organized operation to hunt Pepe down, carried out with the help of environmentalists, has become the focus of an unusually fierce debate over animal rights and the

containment of invasive species in a country still struggling to address a broad range of rights violations during four decades of protracted war with guerrillas.

“In Colombia, there is no documented case of an attack against people or that they damaged any crops,” said Aníbal Vallejo, president of the Society for the Protection of Animals in Medellín, referring to the hippos. “No sufficient motive to sacrifice one of these animals has emerged in the 28 years since Pablo Escobar brought them to his hacienda.”

Sixteen years after the infamous Mr. Escobar was gunned down on a Medellín rooftop in a manhunt, Colombia is still wrestling with the mess he made. Wildlife experts from Africa brought here to study Colombia’s growing numbers of hippos, a legacy of Mr. Escobar’s excesses, have in recent days bolstered the government’s plan to prevent them — by force, if necessary — from spreading into areas along the nation’s principal river. But some animal-rights activists are so opposed to the idea of killing them that they have called for the firing of President Álvaro Uribe’s environment minister.

Peter Morkel, a consultant for the Frankfurt Zoological Society in Tanzania, compared the potential for the hippos to disrupt Colombian ecosystems to the agitation caused by alien species elsewhere, like goats on the Galápagos Islands, cats on Marion Island between Antarctica and South Africa, or pythons in Florida.

“Colombia is an absolute paradise for hippos, with its climate, vegetation and no natural predators,” Mr. Morkel said. “But as much as I love hippos, they are an alien species and extremely dangerous to people who disrupt them,” he continued. “Since castration of the males is very difficult, the only realistic option is to shoot those found off the hacienda.”

The uproar has its roots in 1981, when Mr. Escobar was busy assembling a luxurious retreat here called Hacienda Nápoles that included a Mediterranean-style mansion, swimming pools, a 1,000-seat bull ring and an airstrip. “He needed a tranquil place to unwind with his family,” said Fernando Montoya, 57, a sculptor from Medellín who built giant statues here of hippos, bullfights and dinosaurs for Mr. Escobar.

Hired by private administrators of the seized estate, part of which is now a theme park (imagine mixing “Jurassic Park” and “Scarface” into a theme), Mr. Montoya rebuilt the same statues after looters tore them apart searching for hidden booty. But Mr. Escobar was not content with just fake dinosaurs and bullfights. In what ecologists describe as possibly the continent’s most ambitious effort to assemble a collection of species foreign to South America, he imported animals like zebras, giraffes, kangaroos, rhinoceroses and, of course, hippopotami. Some of the animals died or were transferred to zoos after Mr. Escobar was killed. But the hippos stayed put, flourishing in the artificial lakes dug at Mr. Escobar’s behest.

Carlos Palacio, 54, head of animal husbandry at Nápoles, said Mr. Escobar started with four hippos in 1981. Now, he said, at least 28 live on the estate. “With our current level of six births a year set to climb, we could easily have more than 100 hippos on the hacienda in a decade,” Mr. Palacio said. “Some experts see this herd as a treasure of the natural world in case Africa’s hippo population suffers a sharp decline,” Mr. Palacio continued. “Others view our growth as a kind of time bomb.”

The number of hippos on the hacienda could have reached 31 had Pepe, the slain hippo, not clashed about three years ago with the herd’s dominant hippo, then left with a mate for other

pastures. Once established near Puerto Berrío, the mate gave birth to a calf. Faced with the possibility of a nascent colony away from Nápoles, Colombian authorities decided to act. After all, hippos, despite their docile appearance, are thought to kill more people in Africa than any other large animal.

Unable to find a zoo that would accept the three hippos in Puerto Berrío, officials in the province, of Antioquia considered their options.

- Capturing them was expensive, costing as much as \$40,000 for each hippo, in a country where malnourishment among the poor remains a major problem, said Luis Alfonso Escobar — not related to Pablo Escobar — head of Corantioquia, a state environmental organization.
- Taking them to Africa was dangerous, in addition to being expensive, because of new diseases they might introduce.
- Extirpation

The officials opted for the hunt and hired a nonprofit conservation group, the Neotropical Wildlife Foundation, to help manage the operation. The foundation brought in two experienced hunters. To ensure the hunting party's safety, the environmentalists also secured an escort of soldiers.

All went as planned until the hunt's details and the photo of the soldiers appeared in the news media. Outrage ensued. Newspapers speculated on the fate of Pepe's severed head. (Luis Alfonso Escobar, of Corantioquia, rejected rumors that it went to the hunters.) A judge in Medellín issued a ruling suspending the hunt for Pepe's mate and their offspring. Meanwhile, other hippos may be on the loose. Mr. Palacio, the hippo caretaker here, said at least one was lurking in the waters of a neighboring ranch. Mr. Morkel, the veterinarian, said one or two others could have wandered off, according to local reports. On the grounds of Hacienda Nápoles, a sign warns visitors to the theme park. "Stay in your vehicle after 6 p.m.," it reads. "Hippopotami on the road."

The comments:

1. Leave the hippos alone! Don't forget, we humans are the world's most destructive and invasive species! So, it is more than a little hypocritical for us to kill those poor hippos based upon their being native to another continent. It also is quite lame to justify killing the hippo as less expensive than live capture, based upon Columbia being a poor country and all. If Columbia was so concerned about its poor people they wouldn't be spending billions of dollars on weapon systems, etc. Moreover, the real threat to ecosystems in Columbia aren't a bunch of hippos, rather they are the millions of humans and their activities; such as farming, mineral extraction, industry, etc. Certainly this hippo hunt was just an excuse to give some hunters cover to kill some exotic animal and to make the various hunting loving wildlife biologists feel good about the anti-invasive species, pro-hunting religion they are taught in college.
2. This was written with a tone of some amusement, but the situation is definitely not funny. Hippos are extremely dangerous animals (at least they are vegetarian). Rather than exterminate them all,

why not only eliminate the males - which is what probably should have been done with Sr. Escobar long before it was.

3. As a Colombian I was astonished by the case of Pepe the hippo. But this is more than a case of an invasive species. It was a case of terrible media coverage, generalized ignorance on environmental topics and the most important thing the ambivalent value of life here in my country. The region where Pepe was hunted used to be one of the bloodiest regions of the world, where homicide rates were ten times higher than Brasil or Russia; where the most unhuman acts of violence took place including the killing of entire families and villages in the most atrocious ways. This is one of the places where the word TERROR was invented. Yet somehow the life of a dangerous and out-of-place animal brought here as a demonstration of insane wealth by one of the greatest monsters of the XX century (Pablo Escobar) has become an international mourning issue.
4. There should be international and national laws to prevent the importation of exotic wildlife in the first place. The Colombian government could have saved itself lots of cash if it had sensible legislation to prevent such absurd ideas as a ranch full of exotic wildlife. And African countries should not allow their treasured wildlife to be captured and exported around the world. Prevention is much more eco-friendly and humane than dealing with the aftermath. No matter how wealthy you are, you shouldn't be allowed to create your own little fantasy land if it endangers the ecosystem and causes animal cruelty.