

Thirteen Fatal Errors

*Think All Latin American Countries Are Alike? Watch Out—
False Assumptions Can Be Deadly to International Partnerships*

By Aldemaro Romero

Venezuelan-based nonprofit executive Aldemaro Romero has seen big money raised, progress made and land saved in the last four years of his work in the international nature conservation business. He's also seen opportunities lost, and worse yet, a great waste of effort and precious resources when ideas cross national—and cultural—borders. Romero wrote "Thirteen Fatal Errors" with the hope of enhancing sensibility toward Latin American environmental nonprofits, but his suggestions ring true beyond this realm. He adds, "The names of people and institutions portrayed in this article have been withheld; but any resemblance with actual people or institutions is NOT purely coincidental."

FATAL ERROR #1: *Thinking that all Latin American countries are the same.* This is by far the most common mistake. Very few Northerners realize the profound cultural, economic, social and political differences among Latin countries—differences which are more significant than those between Hawaii and New York and among European countries.

The error is in developing an overly general strategy to be applied anywhere on the continent. Typically I'll hear someone say that strategy "X" should be applied in Venezuela simply because "that's how we did it in Costa Rica." Instead, each country must be

AN ORGANIZATION with vague goals, such as "saving forests," has no future vision, and will make a poor partner.

treated as an individual case.

FATAL ERROR #2: *The "I have done it before, believe me" syndrome.* Americans often use this instant response when a Latin American group objects to a strategy that has been used successfully in the U.S. or in Europe.

I remember a discussion in which an American was instructing a Latin about approaching prospective donors; the American was quite insistent about the importance of making clear all the advantages of tax incentives. When the

latter finally had a chance to speak he simply said: "Fine, except there are no tax breaks for charitable contributions in my country."

Not all foreign experiences can be easily transplanted; trust the local professionals to know better which approaches will really work.

FATAL ERROR #3: Poor judgment in selecting local personnel. Too often international nature conservation organizations (INCOs) choose to work with locals who will carry out their directives uncritically. What's needed is someone with the "right stuff": an independent mind and an aptitude for leadership.

I have repeatedly seen the selection of a local with the "wrong" connections be the kiss of death for an entire initiative. Justifiably or not, individuals associated with organizations such as the Peace Corps or U.S. Aid for International Development (AID) are sometimes suspected as CIA operatives. If the local government and business communities are wary of such ties the program will lose credibility.

FATAL ERROR #4: Inappropriate, or nonexistent, training opportunities. Conservation is a very complex field that requires not just leadership talents but a practical knowledge of biology, administration, communications, fundraising, land acquisition and management and long-term planning.

Often the solution to the training problem is to send U.S. "advisers" to train the locals, but this presents several new problems. First, the adviser usually brings too narrow an approach to problem solving, based on his own experiences elsewhere, and spends more time on indoctrination than tactics.

Second, this reinforces an image rarely spoken but strongly felt among Latins: that Americans "send in our boys to teach those poor little indigenous people how to read and write."

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Ideally, the trainees should be introduced to a range of experiences with many types of organizations. Assuming the trainees have "the right stuff," they will be able to judge which method is best for their own communities.

FATAL ERROR #5: Fawning over local personalities. It's almost comical how INCO representatives come out from meetings with Latin American government officials and business leaders looking as if they had just talked to the monarch. What they don't realize, though, is that these leaders are often more interested in the preservation of their own power than they are in the

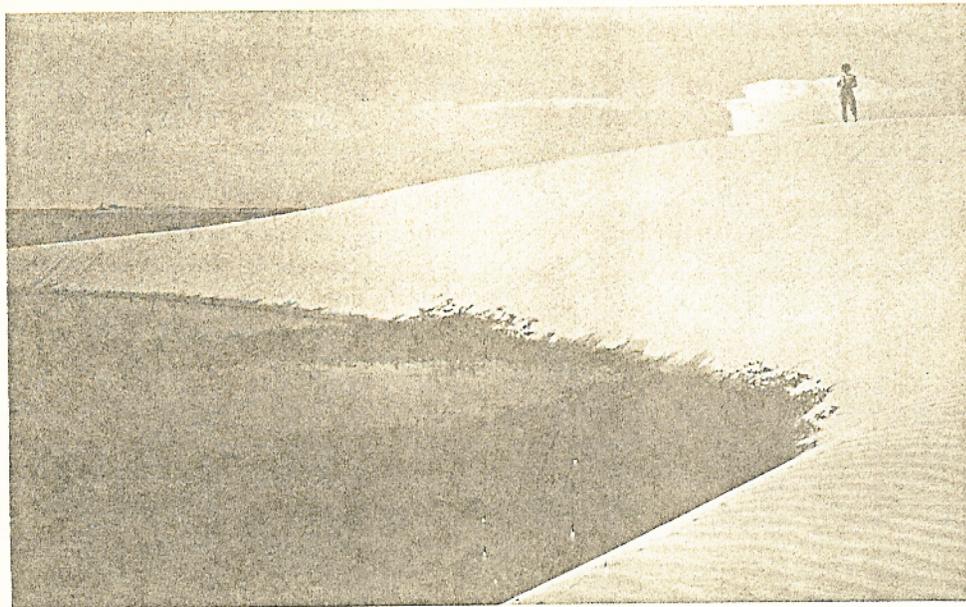
American notion of "social responsibility."

Also unlike their counterparts in developed nations, Latin American nonprofit board members have relatively little influence on the day-to-day initiatives of local nonprofits. Instead, INCOs should be contacting the local conservation professionals who work with the issues on a daily basis.

FATAL ERROR #6: Underestimating local capabilities. I've seen INCO representatives assume, no matter which developing nation they visit, that the conservation community's infrastructure will be a shambles. More to the point, INCO representatives act a bit lost when structures or procedures aren't just like those in their own countries.

Never assume that nothing has been done. INCOs need to take the time to investigate the accomplishments and resources of the locals. Such information is not readily available in Latin America, but INCOs will find many happy surprises if they do preliminary research.

FATAL ERROR #7: Believing that technical advice will easily influence local



LATIN AMERICAN NONPROFITS are accomplishing more than other groups suspect. Venezuela's BIOMA was instrumental in establishing Cinaruco-Capanaparo National Park, which it continues to monitor.

governments. I've seen both INCOs and local authorities spend thousands of dollars trying to solve legal disputes concerning Venezuela's protected areas. But in the end countless reports produced by the "experts" rest on shelves in government offices with no action taken. The most important technical advice goes beyond describing what needs to be done by detailing the best way to go about doing it, including how to use political influence.

FATAL ERROR #8: *Too much faith in multilateral agencies.* Some American conservation organizations rely on the large multilaterals, such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank or AID, for funds for their endeavors. For some reason, they believe that the multilaterals will also become patrons of the local organizations.

But requests for funds from multilaterals have to be filtered through the local governments and through the multilaterals' own bureaucracies, which rival the slowest ones in Latin America. A nonprofit would be lucky to get the support it requests in about three years' time!

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professionals, who know
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communities.**

I have also seen that many of these multilateral agencies assign watchdog responsibilities (for the environmental impact of their loans) to local government, which is simply a farce because the political clout of the watchdogging government agency is often less than that of the regional corporations they must monitor. My advice: don't hold your breath waiting for help from multilaterals.



LOCAL EXPERTS deserve your ear; they have a vast knowledge of the more exotic aspects of the issues.

FATAL ERROR #9: *Fascination with the problem instead of the final goal.* Since there is no magic formula for a successful Latin American conservation program, INCOs spend months and even years trying to arrive at one method of meeting their goals. They end up with a piece of paper with a complicated set of arrows going in all directions, showing little sense for realities and forgetting that there are usually many different ways to get to the same result. The important thing is to remain determined to try something even if there may be a chance of failure.

FATAL ERROR #10: *Too much faith in outside planning.* Some INCOs, trying to overcompensate for the possibility of such failure, will turn to extremely complex and sophisticated planning.

This creates new problems. First, planners are usually from developed countries and are accustomed to working under stable and predictable conditions, unlike those in Latin America. Second, in most cases the planners aren't involved in implementing their own plans.

I would advise choosing the person who will implement the plans early on, so he or she will fully understand all aspects of, and feel committed to, final plans. Instead of trying to anticipate every roadblock, expect that you will have to make substantial changes along the way, and keep your plans as flexible as possible.

FATAL ERROR #11: *Thinking of local organizations as local chapters rather than partners.* One of the main issues facing local conservation organizations is achieving self-sufficiency. I remember a new Venezuelan conservation organization that sent a letter to a larger, but similar, U.S. group explaining that it was full of admiration for the larger organization, with whom it wished to establish a more solid relationship. Instead of encouraging and supporting the Venezuelans, the U.S. organization actually wanted to charge them for the use of their name!

Instead, consider that a local conservation organization has the right to become fully developed as soon as it can, limited only by the resources it can raise and the level of its plans.

FATAL ERROR #12: *A future without a vision.* Once I asked the head of an INCO what it planned to do in Latin America five years down the road. His answer: "I don't know, I guess we want to save your forests."

INCOs with a clear vision of mission and stated goals will enable local organizations to better plan their own futures.

FATAL ERROR #13: *Trying to manipulate people.* Though not the most common, this is perhaps the most damaging error. I have seen instances where Northerners, who know more about the conservation and philanthropic worlds, will selectively keep Latin American groups in the dark in order to pursue their own ends. And almost without exception, my most irritating experiences with INCOs have been dealing with people who constantly change their story about a subject. There's no quicker way to lose trust forever. □

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