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ABSTRACTS

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ROMERO, ALDEMARO. Environmental Studies Program, Macalester College, 1600 Grand Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105-1899, USA.

CUBAGUA'S PEARL-OYSTER BEDS: THE FIRST DEPLETION OF A NATURAL RESOURCE BY EUROPEANS IN THE AMERICAS.

Interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the causes and mechanisms of depletion of natural resources provide powerful tools in conservation biology. That is the case for neoextinctions. I report what was the first depletion of a natural resource in the American continent by Europeans: the pearl-oyster (*Pinctada imbricata*) beds off the coast of the island of Cubagua, Venezuela, early in the Sixteenth century. I reconstructed the historical events as well as the economic and political background that led to that depletion. I estimated the level of exploitation. Based on the natural history of that mollusk species as well as on its competitor, the turkey-wing mussel, *Arca zebra*, I hypothesize about the reasons that led to the depletion of the pearl-oyster and why it did not recover. I conclude that the exploitation of the pearl-oyster beds was unsustainable because of its intensity and local ecology. I also conclude that (a) this type of overexploitation results in gross violations of human rights; (b) the benefits of this type of exploitation are short-lived, and (c) they favor foreign interests and/or local elites to the exclusion of native population. Lessons of these type of historical precedents should be considered by policy makers.