

Adventures in the Wild

Tales from Biologists of the Natural State



Edited by Joy Trauth and Aldemaro Romero

Foreword by Cristián Samper, the Smithsonian Institution

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Nobody's Dolphins

ALDEMARO ROMERO

 *Venezuela: A Magic Biodiversity Country*—that was the title of a popular book I published in 1993 about the rich variety of species in a country with a wealth of diverse ecosystems. As founder and executive director for eight years of BIOMA, the Venezuelan Foundation for the Conservation of Biodiversity, I was greatly interested in promoting the value of species richness. With a PhD from the Tropical Biology Program at the University of Miami, Florida, and a year and a half of training with the International Program of the Nature Conservancy in Washington, D.C., I had decided to found BIOMA as a not-for-profit organization with the goal of protecting Venezuela's biological resources through scientific research and land acquisition.

Although some Venezuelan fauna had been studied previously, there was a notable exception: the marine mammals. Intending to analyze the conservation status of those animals, I began gathering as much data as possible. One of the people I contacted was Prof. Ignacio Agudo, then an official with the Venezuelan Ministry of the Environment. He provided me with an astonishing amount of unpublished information, the product of his own interest in the subject, which clearly showed a horrifying picture: dolphins in Venezuela were being regularly harpooned in order to use their meat as shark bait. The hooked sharks were then mutilated to harvest their fins, which were exported to the United States and other countries where they had become a favorite delicacy among the "yuppies" of that time.

The story sounded both incredible and tragic, and I was afraid that unpublished documents alone would not move the Venezuelan government to action. So in February 1993, Ignacio and I went to a coastal town



Aldemaro Romero with his research boat in Barbados.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL CRESWELL.



Remains of slaughtered dolphins on the beach in Venezuela.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALDEMARO ROMERO.

in eastern Venezuela whose name kept popping up in reports about dolphin killings: El Morro de Puerto Santo.

We accompanied local fishers and documented their routine dolphin-harpooning operations. They not only freely allowed us to go on board their skiff, but also narrated on camera their dolphin-harpooning technique. They openly discussed the use of the slaughtered dolphins and the number of dolphins they regularly killed. After videotaping and photographing the practice, which was one of the most disgusting things I have ever witnessed, we headed back to Caracas, Venezuela's capital, and thought about what to do with this material. By then, Ignacio, tired of being ignored by the Ministry of the Environment, had left his official post there to found his own private, not-for-profit, conservation organization: Fundacetácea (the Whale Fund).

We decided that engaging in a shouting campaign with the government would accomplish nothing: the fishers would have been imprisoned to calm public opinion and that would have been the extent of the government's involvement. Thus, the best approach—we thought—was to come up with a positive campaign aimed at converting fishers into tourist guides for dolphin watching. By becoming tourist guides, the fishers could make more money and protect the marine mammals at the same time by taking tourists to see the dolphins instead of killing them. In addition, we asked the Venezuelan government to declare the area in which dolphins were routinely killed a marine sanctuary, which would add muscle to our idea. We testified before the Venezuelan Congress and explained our plans to the media and government officials. Yet, nothing happened.

Later, in October 1993, I stopped in Miami during one of my regular trips to the United States to obtain funds for conservation programs in Venezuela and was invited to my alma mater to give a presentation to a Conservation Biology class. I told the story of dolphin killing in Venezuela and showed pictures and portions of the video we had made. On that particular day there was a guest in the class: Russ Rector, the head of a local animal rights group, the Dolphin Freedom Foundation. He said that he had heard of the dolphin killings but had never been able to find evidence of such acts. He asked me if he could have a copy of the video and I agreed; after all, we had already given copies of the video to the Venezuelan government and the media. We also had not copyrighted the video, which, as we learned later the hard way, was a mistake.

Two weeks later I received a call at my office in Caracas from the CNN desk in Miami: they were planning to run a story about the killing of dolphins in Venezuela and wanted to interview me. Thus, in November 1993,

CNN ran the story worldwide. They not only showed portions of the video but also interviewed Venezuelan government officials, one of whom, the Fisheries director, said that those killings had never occurred, that the video was a fake, and that it had probably not even been shot in Venezuela because, among other things, he said one of the fishers was "too fat" to be Venezuelan. Despite these denials, the public reacted intensely to the news: the Venezuelan embassy in Washington and the Venezuelan consulate in Miami claimed to have received more than twenty thousand calls, letters, and faxes of protest from the American public.

As a consequence of this publicity, I began receiving at my home anonymous phone calls, the contents of which ranged from insults to threats in which my daughters' names and school schedules were detailed. Ignacio had similar experiences as well. The reaction from the Venezuelan government was swift: instead of investigating the facts (which we had documented for them in the recent past), they moved to charge Ignacio and myself with "treason to the motherland" for "giving the country a bad name." They arrested the fishers in the video and forced them to "confess" that we had "tricked" them into killing dolphins, despite the fact that one of the fishers on the video told in his own words how frequently they harpooned dolphins.

I knew then that it was safer for me and my family to leave the country, and thus we headed for Miami to stay at Steven Green's house (he had been my PhD adviser at the University of Miami) until I could start a new life. Ignacio, not having the same contacts, went into hiding in Venezuela.

I thought I had left this nightmare behind when, on April 1994, a Venezuelan judge issued a warrant for our arrest and vowed on television that, once arrested, we "would never be released from jail." The news became such a *cause célèbre* that even the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front page story about it in which Ramon Martinez, the governor of Sucre State, where the killings had been documented, was reported as saying, "If it were up to me, I'd have them shot." This was not surprising for a country with a very corrupt justice system and one routinely found to be at fault by human rights organizations as well as the U.S. State Department for their less than stellar human rights records, which include torture, death squads, and *desaparecidos* (the "disappeared" ones). This campaign against us included the editing and mistranslating of our video by agents of anti-environmental groups such as the High North Alliance in order to make it appear that we were ordering the killing of the dolphins. Since we never copyrighted the video, there was nothing we could do to prevent it.

A few weeks later, the Venezuelan government solicited the United States for my extradition; however, the U.S. government knew the circumstances surrounding the request and simply ignored it.

Then, in November 1994, I received a phone call from an Eduardo Vetencourt, who identified himself as the Venezuelan vice-consul in Miami, asking to meet me. I accepted provided we could meet in a public place: the Burger King next to the University of Miami main campus. During a two-hour meeting Vetencourt informed me that he was armed and that his "real job" involved "security." He said that a military plane could pick me up in Miami and take me back to Venezuela, where I would receive a "fair trial." Vetencourt added that the Venezuelan authorities had "temporarily" abandoned the idea of kidnapping me because of fear of bad publicity.

Now that the word "kidnapping" had been used, I informed some friends of mine what Vetencourt had told me, and they contacted the FBI. I explained to the special agents who interviewed me what had happened and the story reached Janet Reno, then U.S. attorney general. According to my contacts, she warned the Venezuelan government that such illegal action would seriously damage U.S.-Venezuelan diplomatic relations and that under international law, were I to be kidnapped and taken to Venezuela, the U.S. government would demand my immediate return.

After that, the Venezuelan government left me alone, and people close to the U.S. government told me that Reno's admonishment had worked.

But, what about Ignacio Agudo?

As I said earlier, Ignacio went into hiding, but his family was harassed. The police would knock on Ignacio's parents' doors every night at midnight, trying to find and arrest him. Ignacio's father, eighty-five years old, committed suicide in June 1994 in order to avoid giving away his son's location, and several government security agents attended his funeral hoping to arrest Ignacio. While he remained in hiding, his young wife, Saida Josefina, who had a heart condition and was not able to get the right medical attention, died in April 1995 at age thirty-six of a heart attack, leaving behind not only Ignacio but also their two daughters, Esther, age five, and Lina, age three months.

Obviously, Ignacio needed to be rescued. I contacted an environmentalist on the island of Aruba, an independent former Dutch possession off the coast of Venezuela, and another in Brazil, Jose Truda Palazzo Jr., to make arrangements for Ignacio to go to that country, where he could receive political asylum. Aruba, which did not require a visa of Venezuelans entering that country, had to be used as a "middle country" for the operation. The question was how to get Ignacio out of Venezuela.

I decided to contact Merritt Clifton, the editor of *Animal People*, a publication dedicated to protecting animals' rights, to ask for his help. Merritt came up with a beautiful idea: he would have someone go to Venezuela on a cruise ship and take advantage of the then weak security measures involving tourists in order to smuggle Ignacio out of the country and deliver him to Aruba.

The people Merritt contacted were Alice and Ken Dodge, who were running a Pet Search no-kill adoption center in their home town of Glencoe, Missouri. The plan required the Dodges to go to Caracas by cruise ship on short notice and at their own expense. Once the dates were set, I phoned Ignacio and made the meeting arrangements. The plan was that Alice would disembark in La Guaira (the nearest port to Caracas) with her husband's boarding pass, pick up Ignacio, and re-embark, pretending that Ignacio was her husband. However, there was a catch: Ignacio did not speak English and Alice did not speak Spanish, so everything had to be carefully planned for the meeting to work. From the beginning the plan went smoothly until Alice and Ignacio were trying to board the cruise ship. Venezuelan guards asked Ignacio to show the stamp with fluorescent ink on his hand, a stamp that he should have received when leaving the ship. Ignacio almost panicked but not Alice; as reported by *Animal People*, "As she approached the checkpoint, returning with Agudo, even people already aboard the ship could hear her tell the world that her 'husband' was a dunce, who would end up with the rats in a Venezuelan jail because he'd moseyed off the ship with his hands in his pockets, and would be lucky if some trigger-happy guard didn't stand him up against a wall and shoot him. The guards didn't like that implication, what they understood of it. They didn't like Alice, a large woman whose rage can terrify even people who are heavily armed. They saw Agudo's discomfort. With a glance of sympathy, they waved him past."

Ignacio spent about a month in Aruba getting his paperwork ready to go to Brazil, where he was received by José Truda. After a letter/fax-writing campaign, Ignacio was officially recognized as a refugee by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Yet the Brazilian government, under pressure from Venezuela, almost refused to acknowledge his refugee status, necessitating another public campaign in Brazil to secure his safety.

Brazil denied Ignacio a resident's visa as a political refugee (for the first time in their history), but under international pressure, they agreed to accept him as a regular immigrant. The problem was that he had to get a job to prove himself eligible for immigration, but, of course, he could not

get a job without the appropriate papers . . . and he could not obtain those papers without leaving Brazil and re-entering the country, but that would leave him liable to deportation back to Venezuela. At the end and with the help of some local lawyers, the Brazilian government relented and refugee status for Ignacio and his daughters was legalized.

One of the lingering questions in this whole affair is why would Venezuela persecute us with so much intensity and malice when all that we did was expose a well-known problem and propose a solution for it? There are two clues to the answer to this question.

Beginning in 1991, Venezuela had its tuna export to the United States embargoed because its tuna boats that operate in the eastern Pacific Ocean had been killing thousands of dolphins by encircling them with gigantic purse seine nets when pursuing tuna; because in that part of the world it is not unusual for tuna to swim beneath dolphins, fishers encircle dolphins in the hope that tuna will be caught. In fact, part of the smear campaign by the Venezuelan government against Ignacio and me was that we were "paid agents of U.S. tuna companies."

The other clue is even more sinister. After coming to the United States, I learned through both private and public sources that the real reason for the Venezuelan government persecution of us was that many Venezuelan tuna boats had been involved in the smuggling of cocaine to both the United States and Europe. At that time at least, there was a clear connection between drug traffickers and the Venezuelan government to the point that the president of Venezuela pardoned a known drug trafficker. When the affair was revealed, he claimed that it had been an "honest mistake." When Venezuelan tuna boats carrying drugs were captured by U.S. or European authorities, the crews and anyone else involved were prosecuted by those governments, but when the capture occurred in Venezuelan waters, somehow nothing happened. As the then U.S. ambassador in Caracas, Jeffrey Davidow, told my father after I had fled to the United States, "Don't worry about your son; we'll protect him; after all, the enemies of your son are also the enemies of the United States."

More than ten years later one wonders what has happened about all of this. The International Whaling Commission published a report coauthored by Ignacio, Steve Green, and myself about the exploitation of cetaceans in Venezuela. The report was peer-reviewed and was another vindication of our claims that dolphin killing for shark baiting was and had been a common practice in Venezuelan waters for decades. Rights International, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that represents victims of human rights violations before international courts, filed a petition

in 1996 before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in Washington, D.C., on our behalf. The petition sought an injunction against the Venezuelan government and its agents to prohibit the threats of death and kidnapping and other acts committed against Ignacio, myself, and our families; it also sought compensation for damages suffered by us as a consequence of the Venezuelan government's retaliation attempts against us for having released the results of our scientific studies on dolphin mortality. This commission, part of the Organization of American States and notorious for its ineffectiveness and bias toward government positions, refused even to hear the case.

The tuna embargo against Venezuela still stands despite numerous attempts by the Venezuelan government to have it lifted. Venezuela, despite increasing oil revenues, has an unprecedented level of poverty, government corruption, and undemocratic practices, which have been denounced by many international bodies.

Today Ignacio Agudo lives in Brazil with his two daughters and second wife and has become a Brazilian citizen. He continues to work on other areas of natural history. I became a U.S. citizen, reinitiated my academic career, and currently am chair and professor of the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State University, where I teach, among other things, marine mammalogy. My research in the Caribbean continues on marine mammal exploitation, with numerous papers about this issue published in peer-reviewed publications.

As for the dolphins . . . In 1994 an investigative reporter for the American TV show *American Journal* went to Venezuela, to the same town where we had documented dolphin harpooning. One of the fishers in the town had no problem showing in front of the video camera a harpoon head routinely used for killing dolphins and added, "The killing of dolphins continues, just that it is done in secret."

They are still nobody's dolphins.

Additional Readings

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