

Costa Rica's national parks survive threats . . .

AN ATTEMPT to undermine Costa Rica's national park system has turned out to be a blessing in disguise for conservation. In response to public criticism, Costa Rica's president has more than doubled the area of nature reserves in the country, and the government has just passed legislation making it harder to interfere with existing reserves.

In the autumn of 1980, a Cuban businessman, Adolfo Jimenez Aguilera, suggested to the then president of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Carazo, that his 9000-hectare farm, next to the Palo Verde Wildlife Refuge in the northwest corner of the country, should be made a national park. Aguilera's land became Palo Verde National Park by presidential decree, but before the government could give Aguilera the compensation to which he was entitled, inflation caused the value of Costa Rica's currency to plummet.

Last year, Aguilera asked Carazo to nullify his decree. Carazo agreed. The president's rationale, as explained by spokesmen, was that the government had no right to create a national park unless it could afford to buy the land outright.

The National Parks Service intervened to ask the Department of Justice whether Carazo's action was constitutional. Yes, said the justice department. However, since the Minister of Justice, Elizabeth Odio, is also Carazo's cousin,

The national parks of Costa Rica: saved to save the President's face



there was some doubt about the ruling. The Costa Rican Association for Nature Conservation (ASCONA) launched a campaign against the judgement, to save Palo Verde.

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ASCONA went to court and obtained an injunction "freezing" the status of the Palo Verde National Park. Carazo tacitly admitted defeat and ordered the purchase of Palo Verde, as funds became available. By March of this year the government had bought 70 per cent of the land in the park.

This episode apart, Costa Rica has

one of the best records on conservation of any developing country. National parks or biological reserves occupy more than 8 per cent of its land area.

Partly in an attempt to regain face after his unsuccessful confrontation with Costa Rica's fledgling conservation movement, Carazo created the country's biggest national park only six weeks before stepping down from office in March. The 217,000-hectare La Amistad National Park forms part of a set of

protected areas in the south of the country, known as La Talamanca Range Reserves, which cover half a million hectares. The complex also includes seven Indian reserves, to which the Indians have "exclusive rights in perpetuity"; two biological reserves, solely for scientific study; a forest protection zone, which includes large private holdings where further development is restricted; and one other national park, in which 95 per cent of the land is government-owned. The idea is to achieve a balance between strict preservation, research, education, traditional human use, and sustainable commercial exploitation.

Although the region, which comprises a variety of habitats from lowland rain-forest to subalpine forests and high altitude bogs, has barely been explored scientifically, a preliminary biological inventory indicates that La Amistad alone has more bird species than the entire North American continent. □

Nile canal backed

SCIENTISTS studying the impact of Sudan's controversial Jonglei canal, which will channel a quarter of the White Nile's flow through the Sudd swamps, have dismissed claims that it will be an ecological and social disaster. But they told a conference at the Royal Geographical Society that a proposal for a second phase to decrease the flow of the Nile still further would be disastrous.

The 360 km canal will reduce evaporation losses and so increase the amount of Nile water available for irrigation schemes, in northern Sudan and Egypt.

The current project will reduce the Sudd swamps by about 10 per cent. But an environmental team appointed by the European Development Fund said the Dinka, Nuer and Shilluk tribes will be able to continue their seasonal migration. However a proposed second stage of the project would reduce water levels drastically and badly disrupt tribal life.

The team's ecologists say they still do not know whether changes in the flow of water through the canal will cause it to be blocked with water hyacinths. They told the conference that major growths of hyacinths had already been recorded in the swamps. □

. . . but will the Yorkshire Dales?

RECENT Government appointees to a national park committee are being blamed for a new, more lenient attitude to quarrying in the Yorkshire Dales. This month should have seen the start of a battle between amenity and quarrying lobbies over a plan by Eskett Quarries to extend its limestone quarry at Kilnsey Crag. The company was appealing against the Yorkshire Dales National Park committee's refusal to grant permission for the development. But on the eve of the inquiry, which would have been the first chance for 10 years for a public debate on quarrying in the Dales, the Park committee changed its mind. It resolved to "advise the applicants that if they submit a further application . . . it is likely to be given favourable consideration." Eskett withdrew its appeal and submitted new applications, the inquiry was scrapped, and amenity groups are fuming. Fiona Reynolds of the Council for National Parks said, "We are concerned that the change of heart should have taken place after the membership of the committee had altered. The four members replaced in the summer were influential ones opposed to the extensions." Arthur Gem-



Bruce Coleman

Yorkshire Dales under threat

meil, a committee member who proposed the motion rejecting the original application last December, but who has since been sacked by ministers at the Department of the Environment, said the change of heart was a "cynical by-passing of democratic procedures." □