



Rufford Small Grants Uruguay Conference 2019

Dates: 25-26 October 2019

Venue: Centro Universitario Regional del Este (CURE) – Maldonado Campus – Universidad de la República
Tacuarembó entre Av. Artigas y Aparicio Saravia, Maldonado, Uruguay
(<http://www.cure.edu.uy/?q=node/555>)

Country: URUGUAY

Organisers: Adrián B. Azpiroz and Susana González

Adrián B. Azpiroz is a biologist with particular interest in avian ecology and conservation. He has conducted field research on several globally threatened birds that inhabit the South American Pampas (including a long-term research and conservation project supported by Rufford since 2004). He is also involved in environmental education and the promotion of ecotourism as means to further contribute to biodiversity conservation. He is associated researcher of Biodiversidad y Genética Department (IIBCE).

Susana González is a biologist with wide experience in conservation genetics and endangered species with particular focus on Neotropical mammals. She is the head of the Biodiversidad y Genética Department (IIBCE). She has received several important awards (Whitley Award, 2010 and L'ORÉAL-UNESCO-MEC-ANII "For Woman in Science", 2016), both nationally and internationally, due to her prominent role in scientific research and conservation in Uruguay.

Conference Summary

The overall goal of the meeting was to share Rufford experiences and set the stage for the creation of a new conservation initiative that would take advantage of two key elements of Uruguay's RGS conservation work: hands-

on practice and scientifically-sound approaches. The main objectives of the meeting were: 1) to gain insight regarding conservation work in our country on the basis of exchanging lessons learned from the wide range of Rufford projects carried out in Uruguay; b) identify barriers (proximate and ultimate causes) that limit the effectiveness of current tools and strategies that aim to conserve our national biodiversity; c) create a national network to enhance synergies and cooperation among Rufford past and current grantees.

Conference Impact

There were several examples of where Rufford Funding enabled tangible conservation results. It was clear from the presentations that, in general, grantees have been able to achieve significant conservation outcomes. A few examples follow. Through the Pampas Birds Project and the Responsible Production Programme (Ministry of Agriculture), local landowners received government support to apply habitat management guidelines that benefited grassland biodiversity; this initiative had to desirable outcomes: habitat was enhanced and it private landowners realised that conservation may produce economic benefits. Also, in south-eastern Uruguay, Karumbé (NGO) and several additional collaborators helped produce the need information and local support fro the creation of a new protected area: Cerro Verde Habitat and Species Management Area. This has positively impacted on populations of threatened marine mammals, birds, sea turtles and other co-habiting species.

Most Rufford projects carried out in Uruguay involved some level of local adjustment to address conservation targets. Even within a small country as Uruguay, many factors (i.e., the wide range of stakeholders linked to biodiversity conservation activities, land tenure patterns, the size of the targeted local communities, the type of threat to be tackled, etc.), often demanded specific approaches. The resolution of human-wildlife conflicts, in a general sense, requested innovative solutions such as partnerships with government officials, fisherman communities, farmers and cattle ranchers. Several projects also approached local and national authorities as well as politicians. For example, in the Cerro Verde area, grantees promoted the involvement of local fishermen in activities that aimed to tackle by-catch issues. Also, in Salto and Cerro Largo departments, key insight regarding target species was gained by approaching local communities through local education activities and media. The Responsible Production Programme partnership (mentioned in the previous section) is also another example of the development of solutions fitted to attract local landowners in the Arerunguá region.

In Uruguay, most Rufford Projects (particularly in the case of 1st and 2nd Rufford Small Grants) were carried out by young people pursuing

undergraduate or graduate degrees. In addition to the direct contribution to early career development of project leaders, numerous other young conservationists worked as volunteers on these projects. Many of the latter went on to develop their own projects and conservation carriers.

In the last several years it has turned increasingly difficult to obtain international funding to do conservation work in our country. On the one hand, Uruguay lacks top charismatic habitats and species, the type of targets that many conservation organizations are usually looking for. On the other hand, because of our regional context (Latin America), Uruguay is usually perceived as a country in a good social and economic position. This erroneous impression (at least in relation to economics), means that Uruguay has been lately included in a "low priority list" of countries with regard to conservation funding. For example, Uruguay is behind most Latin American countries in terms of long-term biodiversity strategies such as the development of an adequate network of protected area. Because of this situation, Rufford support has been crucial to carry out work in areas or species for which little information was previously available.

Capacity building and replication were also evident. Some individuals have been involved in more than one project. It seems that, the participation in a given Rufford project provided the necessary experience to individuals (capacity-building) that enabled them to move further and develop new projects (replicability) that focused on other threatened species (La Plata River Dolphin Project and Bottle-nose Dolphin Project, for example). In other cases, Rufford support was used to identify conservation and management needs of species (sea lions, invasive species, terns) and protected areas (Cerro Verde Habitat and Species Management Area). The latter example is particularly relevant because the development of several Rufford-supported projects in the Cerro Verde area provided the necessary data and right conditions for the creation of a new protected marine-terrestrial area in south-eastern Uruguay.

With very few exceptions (individuals that after completing their Rufford Project have moved to other fields), participants of the Rufford Conference are (a significant) part of the current generation of Uruguayan conservationists. During the preparation of the Conference this topic was brought up by several grantees and, in fact, this issue was highlighted in several of the presentations. The following projects are some examples in which this type of training was significant: La Plata River Dolphin Project, Bottle-nose Dolphin Project, Green Turtle Project, Bullfrog Control and Native Amphibian Conservation Project.

Based on the information presented during the meeting, it is clear that most Rufford Projects have produced different types of contributions. A part from scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals (we estimate at least 30-40 papers from all projects), many projects have also produced technical documents (including conservation guidelines), as well as biodiversity-focused public awareness and education materials.

Issues raised and recommendations made

A short summary of the Conference follows. During the first day, all participating Rufford recipients briefly presented the highlights of their projects. We learned about unexpected circumstances that many times arise during project implementation, how individuals dealt with these difficulties and how these issues impacted intended conservation objectives. During the second day we focused on current efforts towards biodiversity conservation in Uruguay. We wanted to identify specific barriers that hinder conservation achievements in our country. After a series of presentations by invited speakers from government agencies, an open round table was organized: "Strategies and challenges linked to the conservation of biological diversity in Uruguay". The round table was facilitated by Susana González and opened with contributions by Alejandro Fallabrino (president of Karumbé, a national NGO with 20 years of conservation experience), Adrian Azpiroz, co-organizer and an independent biologist that has gone through the complete Rufford funding cycle (RSG to Completion grants), Ana Laura Mello from the National Environmental Bureau (DINAMA-MVOTMA) and Soledad Ghione from the National System of Protected Areas Programme (SNAP-MVOTMA).

The main issues raised by participants were:

1. The interest to create a network linking the Uruguayan conservation biology community. The participants also proposed to organize a group of Uruguayan Conservation Biologists. One of the main goals of the organization will be to work towards the inclusion of biodiversity conservation issues in the political agenda and public policy making. Also, government funding for basic conservation work should be increased significantly.
2. The need to bridge the differences between researchers and governmental bodies in order to advance conservation effort through out the country. In general, researchers think that the government does not use all the (scientific) information available to advance conservation. Government officials feel that sometimes the information they need is not being supplied in an easy-to-use format and some "hot" topics have not been addressed yet. There is room for substantial improvement in the relationship between these two groups of stakeholders.

List of participants and conference schedule

A full list of those who attended the conference (including details of the support they received from The Rufford Foundation):

Matilde Alfaro, María José Andrade-Núñez, Adrián Azpiroz, Mauricio Bonifacino (IS), Alvar Carranza, Hugo Coitiño, Josh Cole, Sofía Cortizas, Caterina Dimitriadis, Alejandro Fallabrino, Valentina Franco-Trecu, Soledad Ghione (IS), Noelia Gobel, Susana González, Florencia Grattarola (IS), Sebastián Jiménez, Nadia Kacebas, Cecilia Laporta, Paula Laporta, Gabriel Laufer, Ana Laura Mello (IS), Evaristo Méndez, Davidson Nogueira, Davidson Nogueira, Cecilia Passadore, Gabriel Rocha, Valeria Romano, Macarena Sarroca, Vanessa Silva das Chagas, Carlos A. Toscano-Gadea, Gabriela M. Vélez-Rubio.

IS = Invited Speaker

The list above includes all the participants that were eligible for some kind of support. There were other participants (not necessarily Rufford project participants) that did not receive support but also attended the meeting. Support to participants consisted of: a) bus tickets (10); b) funds for fuel ; c) accommodation; d) one vehicle to transport participants between hotel, venue and restaurant; and e) meals.

The Conference Programme (and other Conference materials) are attached. PDF files of each presentation are available upon request.

The following link includes local press information about the Conference and a series of short interviews to the Grants Director and other participants:
http://www.maldonado.gub.uy/?n=41254&fbclid=IwAR2OwmMI57mWsWCLed2zyLfbECfnW_KFL4n8_xt2iMM7Hsr_6fVJ40IDrJE



Figure 1. Uruguay 2019 Rufford Conference Group at venue, October 2019.