

DON'T BUY THIS ANIMAL

Carlos Delaguilar Gomez stands behind his makeshift street stand, showing off his day's wares: three lionsitos, several piwiches, one lorro, one choshna, several speckled caiman, and a couple of tarakayas. When asked, he also produces a boa, a toucan and a perisoso—a three toed sloth—from two bags he keeps beneath his table. Gomez is an animal vendor. He sells his animals on Jiron Taia, one of the busiest streets in Iquitos, Peru's sprawling marketplace of Belen. "How much for the choshna?" someone asks, pointing to the beautiful Amazonian speckled bear, known locally as the monkey bear. "Twenty soles," he says, about \$8.50 U.S. dollars. "And the lioncito?" "Fifteen." The lioncito is a rare black tamarin monkey. Like the speckled bear, it is an endangered species. Many of Gomez's animals are. Others, like the parrots and macaws that occasionally appear for sale on Jiron Taia, aren't endangered but they are becoming rare in many places. Still, business is good for Gomez and the other animal sellers in Iquitos. He sells two or three animals a day, doubling the price the wholesaler charges. The wholesaler, in turn, is buying the animals for a couple of soles, about a dollar, from farmers coming to sell their goods in Iquitos. For the farmers, the animals are generally "free money," often caught just to pay their fare on the riverboats that bring them from their fields to the city. For the animals, the small cottage industry is devastating. Gomez admits to losing one animal for every three he sells, and he's probably downplaying his losses. "Sometimes they just die," he shrugs. "What can I do?" He has no idea that many of the animals he's selling are endangered, and that others are protected species. For him, it is a job and a more lucrative one than he had selling coffeepots. But the animals for sale on Jiron Taia are only one of several components devastating the wildlife throughout much of Peru's Amazon region. According to Dr. Richard E. Bodmer, who's been studying primates in the Peruvian forests for several years, the primary impact comes from the market impact. "While there is some skin trade and some trade in live animals in Iquitos," says Dr. Bodmer, "the real impact on animal life is in the market. Think about all of the animals killed and sold for meat. And then think about the hunters," he adds. "While they're out there in the monte, the hills and forest, looking for the valuable market meats like peccary, tapir and jungle deer, they've got to eat. And what they're eating are monkeys, armadillo, the smaller animals. So the real impact is the market. And until that changes there will be problems." What Dr. Bodmer says is true for the larger mammals, as well as for the two most sought after species of large river turtles, tarakaya and charapa—both endangered but still openly sold in Belen's markets—as well as for caiman. But there is no meat-market value for sloths, parrots, macaws, anteaters, jaguars, ocelots, pumas, speckled bears, snakes and most of the primates found in Peru's rainforest, all of which are being decimated almost exclusively by either the pet or skin trades. An ocelot skin goes for between eight and twenty dollars. A jaguar skin for \$50 to \$100. Live baby ocelots are sold for under \$15. One local woman who recently bought one thought she was actually doing the animal a favor. "If I don't buy it it will just die in the market. And when it gets too large to keep in the house, my husband and I will free it in the forest." In the meantime, though, she's had its front claws removed to keep it from harming her children. She has no idea that without them it will starve to death within days of being released. Locals are not the only forces preying on the jungle and river wildlife. On a typical day in Iquitos, at least 15 vendors hover around the tourist center of town offering monkey teeth necklaces, stuffed piranha's and baby caiman, snake, ocelot and jaguar skins, and other animal body parts. And at the nationally sponsored San Juan artisanía, snakes, squirrels, birds of prey and other animals are kept in cages and groomed so they can be killed, then stuffed and posed for the tourist trade. Most of the tourist trade in Iquitos is in eco-tourism, people who should know better. But, like the woman who bought the ocelot, many of the eco-tourists who buy these animals and their products think that either their buying a single stuffed baby caiman won't really hurt anything, or that their purchase of a live animal is really doing the animal a favor. And the sellers are more than willing to tell the right story to get past the tourist's conscience. Jaguar skulls come from old zoo animals who died naturally; caiman skins and teeth come from animals who were killed for their meat; parrots and macaws were house pets that have to be sold to provide money for food. Some of the stories may occasionally be true. But that doesn't lessen the impact those losses have on animal populations. To combat those losses, an enormous amount of education must take place. Locals who have a taste for carne de monte, jungle meat, must be made aware of the impact their food choices have on the rainforest ecosystem, that ocelots are not pets and a jaguar pelt hanging on a wall is a symbol of shame rather than a sign of wealth. Eco-tourists must encourage one another that "one little stuffed caiman" will indeed hurt the caiman population. Some of that education has begun taking shape. To highlight Peru's efforts to protect some of its endangered river species, several years ago former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori himself went out into Peru's protected Amazon lakes posing as a fisherman willing to pay a little graft to gain permission to poach. In one instance he wound up firing several corrupt officials willing to take his money. With considerably less fanfare, scientists like Dr. Bodmer have been studying the mammal populations in some of the Peruvian jungle's most overhunted areas and developing, with local scientists, wildlife management systems which encourage sustainable hunting techniques. But more is needed to keep the current levels of decimation from escalating out of control. Ironically, for many of the species sold for skin and souvineers, it may be the tourist trade itself—which encourages the street sellers and artisans to deal in animals—that finally closes the industry down. Several prized souvineer species have already disappeared from Peru's forests. Others, like jaguars and puma, are becoming scarce. One wholesaler on Jiron Taia said he used to get 10 jaguar skins and skulls a week; now he gets one or two. But while his price to the hunters has gone up, his selling price has remained stable. Other prize skins, like Anaconda, which used to sell for \$6 a meter, now sell for only \$4—not because tourists want the skins less but because large anacondas are very rare these days and smaller ones simply don't hold the same allure for buyers. But nothing will work as well as eco-tourists simply putting their money where their tee-shirts are and passing the animal vendors by.

About the Author

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