

## **DRAFT FOR VANCOUVER PRESENTATION**

### **1. INTRODUCTION AND THANKS**

I wish to begin my presentation to such a distinguished audience of professionals from different countries, by thanking the invitation to this Conference, since it gives me the opportunity to make a brief presentation. I hope my words will encourage the exchange of experiences among those of us devoted to environmental conservation and the assessment of the impact that human activity has on the environment.

I preside over the "Instituto Nacional de Parques de Venezuela" (Venezuelan National Parks Institute), an Institution responsible for conserving and managing those territories that have been declared as National Parks and that are part of the common patrimony of all Venezuelans. Currently, Parks are distributed all over the country and their combined areas represent 15% of our national territory. This Institution's administration seeks to fulfil, through different planning tools, the task of supervising the sustainable use of resources present in the National Parks areas.

Venezuela is well known as one of the main oil producers in the world. It has great potential for natural gas production and a fairly important mining activity. What is not so well known is the fact that it is one of the richest countries in biodiversity: not only diversity of species and ecosystems, but also socio-cultural diversity. Consequently, Venezuela is the tenth wealthiest country in biodiversity in the world and the sixth wealthiest one in the Americas. It is also the second country in Latin America, after Costa Rica, with the highest percentage of protected areas.

It can be quickly inferred then, that the country's double condition as an oil and mineral producer and a haven for such a wealth of biodiversity poses serious dilemmas and frequent contradictions among the political decision-makers, who must respond for the sustainable use of environmental resources and the execution of development projects that have a definitive impact on the environment. This concern has led to the creation of a fairly wide legal framework, which serves as a central reference to find solutions to the above-mentioned dilemmas and contradictions.

### **2. THE CREATION OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITIES**

We were very interested in the central topic of this Conference: the creation of institutional capabilities to continuously evaluate environmental impacts. The first reason for this is that for a fairly long time now, environmental protection has ceased to be a benevolent or optional

activity to become a mandatory task to be assumed by governments and citizens alike within their respective spheres, ruled by different legal instruments.

In almost every country, these legal instruments try to formally protect the environment and its resources, challenging the different risks that face them continuously. In the Venezuelan case, the recent adoption of a new Constitution has raised the sustainable development to constitutional rank. Several laws have been passed that are aimed at the protection of biodiversity and environmental quality. A summary of these laws is included in the Annex to this presentation.

Despite all this, I wish to highlight that the capability of drafting and passing these legal instruments could be greater than that of setting up institutional arrangements, and that the real capability would lie in facing the challenges brought about by urban life and industrial dynamics onto protected areas such as National Parks and the environment in general. This means that there are some serious limitations in the capacity to respond to risks and threats in an effective and timely fashion, be they unforeseeable (such as natural catastrophes) or reasonably foreseeable (roads and transportation, hydroelectric projects, agricultural projects).

Approximately four years ago, we had a natural catastrophe in Venezuela's State of Vargas, to the north of Caracas. This event resulted in a large number of victims and generated changes in the sector's coastal relief. It also dragged different types of sediments toward a national Park located to the west on the same coastline, which seriously affected this Park's marine biodiversity. More recently, given the country's interest in diversifying its oil industry, preparatory activities for a great natural gas exploitation project in the northeastern part of the country have been started. The industrial operation centres for this project are in the vicinity of two National Parks; thus, the gas pipes' routes from the marine subsoil to the mainland are being assessed to select those with a lesser impact on the protected ecosystems of these two Parks.

The above mentioned references are merely illustrative, but allow me to stress the importance that environmental authorities give to a higher technical competence level for those entities in charge of assessing environmental impacts. In the Venezuelan case, this is very clear: despite not having reached elementary levels, we need to widen the degree of institutional capability in order to assess the impact that these projects have on the environment and biodiversity.

If these entities are responsible for defining the contents or requirements that need to be fulfilled by Environmental Impact Assessments, we need to promote the incorporation of some additional requirements, such as those related to a more dynamic (or less static) vision of the relationship between the different variables analysed. Of course, we should also take into

account the most critical aspects of the socio-cultural components of the communities settled in the project's area, so that these impact assessments should also touch upon the economic base of said communities. Another aspect worthy of attention is the promotion of continuous education for those professionals devoted to assessing environmental impacts, together with the certification of consulting groups or companies who are hired to carry out the respective studies.

Should we not act in this way, it would be difficult to obtain a reliable evaluation of the extent of the environmental impact of projects such as the natural gas one or the construction of a new highway. These projects normally generate internal migratory processes in countries, as a consequence of the high expectations that least-favoured sectors have of increasing their life quality levels or at least obtaining better paying jobs to improve their family income.

### **3. USEFULNESS OF INFORMATION AND EXCHANGE NETWORKS**

Normally, we are continuously witnessing phenomena or processes that are in themselves complex, and that in view of their own dynamics give medium and long-term results. On the other hand, the modern world continuously shows us the different elements of what constitutes global environmental problems that affect us all. All this encourages me to proclaim before such a distinguished audience, my confidence in the usefulness of information and experience exchange networks. These networks are essential to create institutional capabilities that will give a timely and efficient answer to environmental challenges or risks.

From a governmental institution's point of view, such as the one I preside over, this is a top priority. I feel we must belong to professional networks, academic centres, and non-governmental organizations because if it is up to us to define what should be included in the environmental impact assessments for each project, then we must strive to increase the level of our officials, so that they can discuss the different aspects of the study with the specialists that carry them out. At the same time we would be strengthening our governments' capacities to make the best decisions to defend the environment and the quality of life of present and future generations.

As an example of sustainable management of resources present in National Parks, we have created several planning instruments with the participation of stakeholders from the private sector, the government and the communities. These instruments allow us to build a much-needed consensus for the harmonic management of the different productive and service activities derived from tourism, for example, and that take place in each National Park. Regarding the latter, I should mention the agreements required to organize solid waste disposal,

protection of drinking water sources, and the use of new energy sources, among other elements that are considered critical.

Now I would like to mention some of our basic needs in this matter:

- Quick environmental assessments starting at the baseline level
- Stakeholders' involvement in impact assessment and in subsequent plans or programmes for environmental restoration and compensatory measures.
- Design of organisations required to supervise projects and follow results of the different stages closely, even those that due to different reasons could not be foreseen at the beginning and that need to be corrected as soon as possible.

In this sense, I would also like to stress the importance of investigating socio-cultural patterns of indigenous communities settled in the National Parks' territories, since we need to compile the millenary knowledge of the communities that populated these territories, in order to evaluate many of their daily practices that have aided conservation. The experience seems to suggest that not all practices are equally protective of the environment, but if we want to make a selection of the best, we need enough data and information to sustain the different decision criteria.

Apart from expressing my confidence, as a professional, on the usefulness of networks that bring specialists, governmental agencies, universities and research centres together, I want to offer you our experience at the Instituto Nacional de Parques de Venezuela to tackle different situations. We are truly convinced that we could make excellent partnerships both professionally and scientifically to facilitate relationships with the community of specialized professionals in charge of environmental impact assessments.

In summary, the relationships that these information and exchange networks bring are of valuable help for research activities that will allow us to know our territories and their ecosystems better. In the case of the Instituto Nacional de Parques (INPARQUES) we also do environmental impact assessments for those projects that affect the territories under our management. Thus, the need to have access to databases that will help us support the research carried out in our parks. The results of these research efforts will increase our capacity to evaluate impact assessments carried out by third-party specialists for specific projects that may have some kind of impact on our territories.

Here it would be timely to ask how to evaluate impacts on specific ecosystems if we do not have the necessary, reliable and updated data on their composition and dynamics. The answer needs to be found urgently, since demographic pressures and local or regional development

projects have a different behaviour, perhaps due to the fact that they fulfil other objectives or promises that suppose bigger collective well being.

At present, the Institution I preside is about to conclude a Loan Agreement with the World Bank to consolidate the National Parks System that will be extended with a second Agreement that will allow us to consolidate the results obtained and make them permanent. In the preparatory work for the second Agreement we are giving due importance to the creation of information platforms that feed from different sources and data. These platforms will constitute the normal support for the National Parks' management with geo-referenced data. Another important component of this second financing request is personnel training. Finally, but not less important, part of this new loan will be devoted to the organizational modernization of the institution itself. This will allow management decentralization toward the regional and local levels where the parks are located.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

I wish to conclude this brief presentation by reiterating my gratitude for the invitation extended to me by the organizing committee of the IAIA's annual conference. I took the chance of this very valuable opportunity to share some of our concerns with this selected group of specialists and representatives of important organizations who have ample experience in this sector. I trust that during the conference we will have a chance to elaborate on some of the topics that interest us all.

Thank you very much for your attention.