



Report to The James Rennie Bequest by Wendy Spence (9552217)

Jardin Gaia Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre- Costa Rica

Introduction

In July 1998, I travelled to the Pacific coast of Costa Rica in order to visit the Jardin Gaia Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre. The purpose of my visit was originally two-fold. Firstly, to work at the centre as both a general volunteer and an environmental educator, and secondly to carry out my own project with reference to the locally endangered populations of Squirrel Monkeys (*Saimiri oerstedii*).

Unfortunately, due to an illness suffered by myself, I was not in a position to carry out such a scientific project outwith the rescue centre. I was however able to fully concentrate on my role as an environmental educator, as well as helping other volunteers with their research and small projects.

The following report will comprise a review of the time I spent in Jardin Gaia, as well as briefly looking at the conservation situation within Costa Rica itself.

Jardin Gaia

Jardin Gaia was the first official rescue centre for wildlife in Costa Rica (officially registered in 1991)- there are many more of a much more 'dubious' nature. During my two month stay, I worked alongside more than twenty other volunteers, some of whom were staying for more than three months, others were just working on a very occasional basis. Dario Castelfranco and Cynthia Pensa, the centre directors, are completely reliant upon these volunteers, but they do also employ four full-time Costa Rican members of staff who help to ensure that the centre runs smoothly.

The aims of Jardin Gaia are to both rehabilitate and release injured (both mentally and physically) animals and to educate people as to the consequences of illegally removing wildlife in the first instance. Originally, the centre aimed to breed endangered species in captivity, but it was soon realised that it was much more feasible to let the animals reproduce in their natural environment, *after* they had been rehabilitated.

As well as being an animal refuge, Jardin Gaia also has an Orchid conservation project, a butterfly garden and is developing a natural history museum in the hope that this will relieve visitor pressure from the animals themselves.

### My Role within Jardin Gaia

My main duties involved carrying out general tasks with the many animals (cleaning, feeding and 'rehabilitation' procedures) as well as conducting tours for visitors, and helping to improve the facilities made available to them.

I very much enjoyed my role as an 'educator' as it certainly helped to reinforce this as my future career choice. The visitors for whom I conducted tours certainly varied in terms of their background (although most originated from North America and Europe), they also had varying levels of interest both in the animals and what we were actually doing at Jardin Gaia.

On average my tours lasted for just approximately one hour, and consisted of an introduction to both myself and the centre, and our aims. From there, I would lead each group (of no more than ten people, three times daily), around the grounds, being very careful to avoid veterinary and quarantine areas.

During the latter part of my stay, I was given more and more tours to take daily, and I felt that I was able to tailor these to each individual groups interest. I very much enjoyed the chance to convey my deep love of the environment and animals to these groups.

All of the volunteers tried to focus on the effect which humans can have on the wildlife and environment of Costa Rica, with many of the animals proving to be very poignant case studies.

At the beginning of my stay, I often felt that the improvements could be made to the facilities for visitors. There was a general feeling amongst the volunteers and staff at Jardin Gaia that the centre should not be gradually forced into a 'zoo' like attraction, but this did not change the fact that the entrance fees were one of the largest sources of income.

When forced to abandon my scientific study, I realised that I had the time available to concentrate on these facilities, and decided to focus on one slightly larger project. I hand cut, carved and painted wooden signs for every animal cage, with the names of each animal engraved in both Spanish, English and Latin. Not only did this have the effect of reducing confusion for both new volunteers and visitors, but also made the cages more aesthetically pleasing- if only from the outside!

I also updated the guest book for the centre in order that we were able to tell exactly what peoples' attitudes were towards what we were trying to do.

Despite the huge amount of animal faeces involved, I also greatly enjoyed my general duties around the centre. Myself and other volunteers began our day at 6am, when all the cages were scrubbed and the animals fed their individually prepared diets. Although a large number of the animals were unsuitable for release into the wild in the near future, great care was taken to ensure that disturbance was minimal whilst volunteers were inside the cages. As well as changing water and checking the animals at regular intervals, there was also the opportunity to work with individuals which required special attention. In my case this involved working with three very young animals- a Coati (*Nasua narica*), a Squirrel Monkey and a Spider Monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi*). The Coati simply required regular exercise to ensure that he would be able to fend for himself upon release back into the wild. The two monkeys on the other hand were still being fed by hand, and were also very habituated towards humans. Great care had to be taken on my part to maintain a level of contact that would not result in the animals becoming at all dependent upon me. There is obviously a very fine line which has to be drawn between the need for exercise, and what can be learned by the animal, and too close contact with humans.

Shortly before my departure, we were finally able to introduce the Squirrel Monkey to the existing troop. The Spider Monkey was just beginning this introductory phase, and all indications seemed as though it would be very successful- with the elderly (dominant) female becoming protective of the infant.

### The Other Jardin Gaia Wildlife

At present in Costa Rica, it is illegal to own any wild animal without a permit (issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment- *MINAE*). The penalty for such a crime is initially confiscation of the animal(s), and for re-offending, a fine as well as confiscation. However, as no real records are of previous offences, this is hardly an appropriate deterrent towards the keeping of wildlife as pets.

This has resulted in a large amount of animals being confiscated by MINAE, and other organisations, and being taken to Jardin Gaia. Many animals were also abandoned at the centre by people who no longer felt in a position to offer an exotic species a home (usually because the animal becomes too large or aggressive), or they have realised that exporting an exotic species is not as easy as they initially thought. By this point in time, the animal has normally been separated from its' mother and has become slightly habituated to humans, and may even have severe health problems.

The average number of animals contained within Jardin Gaia is approximately 275- with this number changing on a daily basis. The animals which I saw pass through be too numerous to list in detail, and varied from Sloths (*Perezoso de tres dedos*) to Boa Constrictors (*Boidae*)

### Conclusion

My time in Jardin Gaia and Costa Rica was certainly one of the best experiences that I have ever had. Not only did I gain more confidence in myself through travelling there alone and guiding tours, but I also made life long friends and contacts.

I have been given the chance, to work with some of the Worlds' rarest species and to hopefully help their situation in some small way, and this is something that I shall never forget. My work has helped me choose a career in environmental education, as I want to continue making a difference.

My illness may have forced a prompt change of plans, but it also allowed me to see another side of Costa Rica, and its' people! Costa Ricans may be much criticised for their sometimes exploitative attitude towards their natural environment, but they are usually only trying to make the best of themselves and their families, and keep up with pressures forced upon them from outside.

I hope that through the continual work of future volunteers and staff, the message told by Jardin Gaia will spread quickly!

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