

Introduction

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in South America is bordered by Columbia to the west, Brazil to the south, Guyana to the west, the Caribbean Sea to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the northeast. The islands of Aruba, Barbados, Bonaire, Curacao, Grenada, the Grenadines, the Lesser Antilles, Santa. Lucia, Saint Vincent, and Trinidad and Tobago lie just north of the Venezuelan Coast.

The 2,800 km of coastline includes the mainland and more than 324 islands, islet and keys including the following islands: Aves, Blanquilla, Coche, Cubagua, La Sola, La Tortuga, Los Testigos, Margarita and La Orchila and the archipelagos: Las Aves, Los Frailes, Los Hermanos, Los Monjes and Los Roques. Coastal habitat includes sandy beaches, rocky shores, seagrass beds, coral reefs and lagoons. Mangrove forests cover 6730 square kilometers of the coast, largely in the Gulf of Paria, the Orinoco Delta, and the Gulf of Venezuela.

The 36,000 square kilometer Orinoco Delta, in the east, includes estuarine and marine areas. The brackish Lake Maracaibo in the northwest connects with the Gulf of Venezuela and the Caribbean Sea via a 55 km strait at its northern edge.

RAMSAR sites of importance for wildlife include Ciénaga de los Olivitas which is a major feeding and resting area during migration (October to April) for a number of waterbirds. Nesting species include American flamingo, osprey, reddish egret, scarlet ibis and red knot all of which are facing population declines. Parque Nacional Ciénagas de Juan Manuel has populations of American manatee (V), American crocodile (V), giant (E) and neotropical otter; with Refugio de Fauna Silvestre de Cuare with coral reefs, sandy beaches, mangroves and marshes supporting migratory and wintering waterbirds and nesting marine turtles; Parque Nacional Archipiélago los Roques has 45 islands and keys and a lagoon which support nesting and migratory birds, as well as nesting sea turtles; and Laguna de la Restinga, a shallow lagoon with barrier beach and marine/coastal wetlands which is a resting and feeding site for migratory birds.

At Risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (V), Endangered (E) or Critically Endangered (CR).

Avian species – A variety of ducks and geese, wading birds such as ibis, heron, egret and spoonbills, shorebirds such as plovers and sandpipers, and gulls and terns are either resident or migratory on Venezuela's coast. In addition to the national parks and Ramsar sites listed above, there are numerous other areas along the coast, in the Orinoco Delta and on Lake Maracaibo where migrant and resident birds nest, feed and overwinter.

Species of special concern include the plain-flanked rail (E), Agami heron (V), Leach's storm-petrel (V) and rusty-flanked crane (V).

Marine mammals – The American manatee (V) is found in the eastern part of the country, mainly in the Orinoco Delta and Gulf of Paria. Guiana dolphin and neotropical otter inhabit nearshore areas, while offshore multiple species of dolphin and whale are found. Of special concern are the blue (E), humpback (E), sei (E) and sperm (E) whales.

Marine reptiles – Five species of sea turtle, hawksbill (CR), green (E), leatherback (V), olive ridley (V) and loggerhead (V) are found in Venezuelan waters. The olive ridley is the only species that doesn't nest in the country, but it is regularly seen near Margarita Island in the northeast. Green and leatherback nest along the Guyana border. Hawksbill, green, loggerhead and leatherback nest along the north coast near the Lesser Antilles, although loggerhead nests are rare.

The American crocodile (V) inhabits coastal lagoons, mangroves and Lake Maracaibo. Venezuela also hosts smooth-fronted and dwarf caiman. The country's most important site for coastal caiman is at Laguna de Tacarigua National Park, a RAMSAR site on the north coast with both coastal and mangrove lagoon areas which also hosts nesting leatherback, hawksbill, green and loggerhead turtles.

Regional Seas

Caribbean Sea
Atlantic Ocean

Past experience

Venezuela has experienced a number of oil spills. Examples include the grounding of the NISSOS AMORGOS (1997) in the Maracaibo Channel spilling approximately 3600 tonnes of crude oil which reached 45 km of beach, although no oiled wildlife response was reported; the MAERSK HOLYHEAD (2005) collision with a bulk carrier spilling between 100-300 tonnes of oil, which resulted in at-sea and on-shore clean-up; and the bulk carrier GDANSK (2011) ran aground on the Orinoco River spilling an unknown quantity of oil and triggering the establishment of a Committee, which included multiple agencies, to oversee response to sporadic oiling along the river.

Spills from oil wells in Lake Maracaibo were reported in December 2002, January and February 2003. There are no records of wildlife being impacted during these incidents. In 2007, however, there are conflicting reports regarding whether a spill along the seacoast near Guiria affected seabirds. Some reports of lightly oiled sea turtles did follow this incident.

Response: the role of the authorities

The Instituto de los Espacios Acuáticos (Institute of Aquatic Spaces, INEA), which is the competent national authority, is assisted by Petroleos de Venezuela SA (the national oil company, PDVSA) in developing contingency plans and conducting responses under the National Contingency Plan. The country is divided into 5 Maritime Regional Zones and 2 River Based Zones with warehouses and equipment for response. Small spills are dealt with locally, with a committee and National Central Coordination group activated if needed at the regional level.

The PDVSA has had its own National Contingency Plan, in place since 1986, however, since 2016, the economic crisis in Venezuela has resulted in reduced funding for maintaining PDVSA's facilities and infrastructure resulting in a limited ability to respond.

Oiled wildlife response

Formal guidelines?

There is no formal policy or oiled wildlife plan within the National Contingency Plan.

Response objectives and strategy

N/A

Euthanasia or rehabilitation?

It is likely that rehabilitation would be allowed by the Ministry of the Environment, however expertise is limited within the country. Euthanasia would likely be considered acceptable based on welfare considerations.

Impact assessment

The Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research (Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas, IVIC) and its Ecology Center under the Science and Technology Ministry, is in charge of research in biology, ecology and biodiversity conservation, among other responsibilities, and might be involved in impact assessment.

The Margarita Marine Research Station (Estación de Investigaciones Marinas de Margarita, EDIMAR) of the Fundación La Salle undertakes research on the marine environment, mainly on fisheries, oceanography and marine biology. Their personnel, facilities and equipment might be available for impact assessment.

The Sea Turtle Research and Conservation Centre (Centro de Investigación y Conservación de Tortugas Marinas, CICTMAR), which is affiliated with the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAS) and works on conservation, would likely be involved in sea turtle impact assessment.

Various universities have marine research programmes and may also be involved.

Notification and early response

There is no system in place for notification of, or early response to, oil impacted wildlife.

Wildlife responders

Sociedad Conservacionista Audubon de Venezuela (Venezuelan Audubon Conservation Society, SCAV) is active in monitoring and conservation of coastal birds and may be able to provide some assistance but does not have any experience in, or facilities for, oiled bird rehabilitation.

CICTMAR may also be of assistance should there be impacted sea turtles but does not have facilities for oiled turtle rehabilitation.

There are several organisations which have been involved in cetacean research and/or conservation, but it is not clear whether they would be able to assist in any rescue and rehabilitation efforts.

Cooperation between stakeholders

There is some cooperation between conservation and research organisations on an informal level.

Venezuela is a signatory to the Cartagena Convention (marine environmental protection for the Wider Caribbean), participates in the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency, Information and Training Centre (RAC-REMPEITC), and holds a bilateral agreement with Trinidad and Tobago for oil spill response.

Permanent facilities

There are no permanent facilities for oiled wildlife rehabilitation in Venezuela.

Current processes

N/A

Documentation and references

General references

General References

ITOPF Country Profile (2015)

Birdlife Country Profile

State of the World's Sea Turtles (SWOT) Report Volume 11

Dow, et al. Venezuela Sea Turtle Habitat. Sea Turtle Nesting in the Wider Caribbean-WIDECAS Technical Report #6

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