

EDITORIAL

A HERPETOLOGIST ON THE TRAIL OF THE ORINOCO'S TRAVELER

Abdem Ramón Lancini is largely known for his herpetological studies in Venezuela. The contributions and legacy of this researcher will allow his name to be indissolubly tied to the history of herpetology in this South American country. Even the layperson is familiar here with his name, especially through his bestseller books (“Serpientes de Venezuela” 1976, 1986; “Die Schlangen von Venezuela”, 1989). Born in Caracas in 1934, Lancini soon started to get interested in snakes, a subject that ended in a lifetime passion. His life, filled with so many details, remains, however, a largely untold story still waiting to be written. In spite of his name being associated with herpetology, there is an aspect of Lancini that most herpetologists ignore. Besides his interests in herpetology, Lancini was a dedicated student of the life and travels of Alexander von Humboldt, whom he admired most. When I met Lancini in 1982 at the Museo de Ciencias Naturales de Caracas (Caracas Natural Sciences Museum), of which he was Director from 1962 to 1991, he already was engaged in studying the Prussian universal thinker, an activity that entertained him for more than 30 years. As a result of this activity, Lancini wrote more than a dozen papers, largely unknown to the herpetological community, on the baron von Humboldt. Additionally, he quietly kept working on a book that he finished about eight years ago, although he never saw published, as death visited him in 2007.



Statue of Humboldt at the entrance of El Guácharo Cave, in eastern Venezuela. February 2008. Photo by Enzo La Marca.

Estatua de Humboldt a la entrada de la Cueva del Guácharo. Febrero 2008. Foto por Enzo La Marca

Printed at the end of 2008, and just available in 2009, Lancini's *magnus opus* (titled “Alejandro de Humboldt. El Viajero del Orinoco” –Alexander von Humboldt, the Orinoco's traveler) is a true legacy for humboldtian scholars. The book, however, probably will be largely unnoticed to the herpetological community. Although Lancini took the time to comment in his book on the herpetological findings of Humboldt in Venezuela, this work is not the right place for a deep herpetological search on this matter. For the later, I would suggest the interested person to read Lancini's 1974 “Humboldt y la herpetología de Venezuela” (Humboldt and the herpetology of Venezuela; published in the *Boletín de la Asociación Cultural Humboldt, Caracas*, 10:93-103). Some passages in Lancini's book are a true herpetological homage for Humboldt, the universal thinker that described the rattlesnake *Crotalus cumanensis*, and amazed the world with his writings on the crocodilians and turtles of the mighty Orinoco River, reporting on their great numbers and foreseeing the fate of these now endangered species.

Lancini's posthumous book provides an enjoyable narrative of events in the life of Humboldt, especially within the frame of Venezuela, narrated with the historic and geographic rigorousness imposed by the mind of a scientist. Without being a writer, Lancini managed to write a harmonic succession of themes, evocating Humboldt's style, that leave an eagerness to read one chapter after another.

I am truly happy that his daughter Maria Daniela helped to see this book published, to let us enjoy the final output of a herpetologist that spent many years of his life retracing Humboldt's expeditions in Venezuela. Lancini was always, according to his own words, in an indefatigable eagerness to follow the footprints of Humboldt in Venezuela. And he managed to tell the story! Lancini's book on Humboldt is a major contribution, and will surprise more than a herpetologist.

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