

## Venezuela: Yacambú National Park

[Summary](#)   [Description](#)   [Threats](#)   [Solutions](#)   [Conclusion](#)   [Photo Gallery](#)

**Date of most recent on-site evaluation:**

April 2001

**Date posted:** May 2002

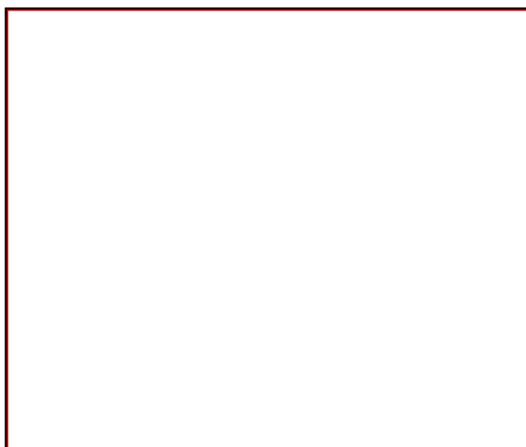
**Location:** Lara State

**Year created:** 1962

**Area:** 26,916 ha

**Ecoregion:** Venezuelan Andes Montane Forest

**Habitat:** Cloud and Rain Forest, Semi-deciduous Forest, and Savanna



### Summary

#### *Description*

Yacambú is located in the state of Lara on the southern slope of the Portuguesa Cordillera, which is a part of the northern Andes mountain range. The park was created in 1962 to protect the watershed of the Yacambú River, whose waters are vital to the city of Barquisimeto and to the Quibor Valley Special Agricultural Use Area (a IUCN category VI sustainable use protected area). Due to its strategic geographic location, Yacambú is key in the preservation of Andean and coastal species, in addition to those of the interior plains, known as Llanos. In 1999, Yacambú was officially increased in size by 85%, from 14,580 to 26,916 ha, primarily to protect 4,000 ha of the watershed, which will flow into Yacambú-Quibor Dam currently under construction. A new management plan for this area of the park has not been finished, and at the time of ParksWatch's on-site evaluation, the new area was not yet being managed as part of the park; therefore, our evaluation pertains to the original 14,580 ha.

#### *Biodiversity*

Yacambú National Park is characterized by high levels of floristic and avian diversity; 600 plant and 254 bird species have been recorded in the park. Famous for the number and variety of orchids, the park also protects globally endangered and threatened fauna species, such as the spectacle bear and the helmeted curassow.

#### *Threats*

Yacambú is considered [vulnerable](#), meaning that although urgent solutions are not needed at this time, we recommend continued monitoring of existing low-level threats in order to ensure the protection and maintenance of biological diversity in the medium-term future. Human encroachment into the park is the most significant threat at this time. Other low-level threats include inadequate infrastructure and personnel, poor sign posting, poaching, forest fires, and timber extraction.

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*



*View of  
Yacambú  
National Park*

### **Description**

#### *Physical Description*

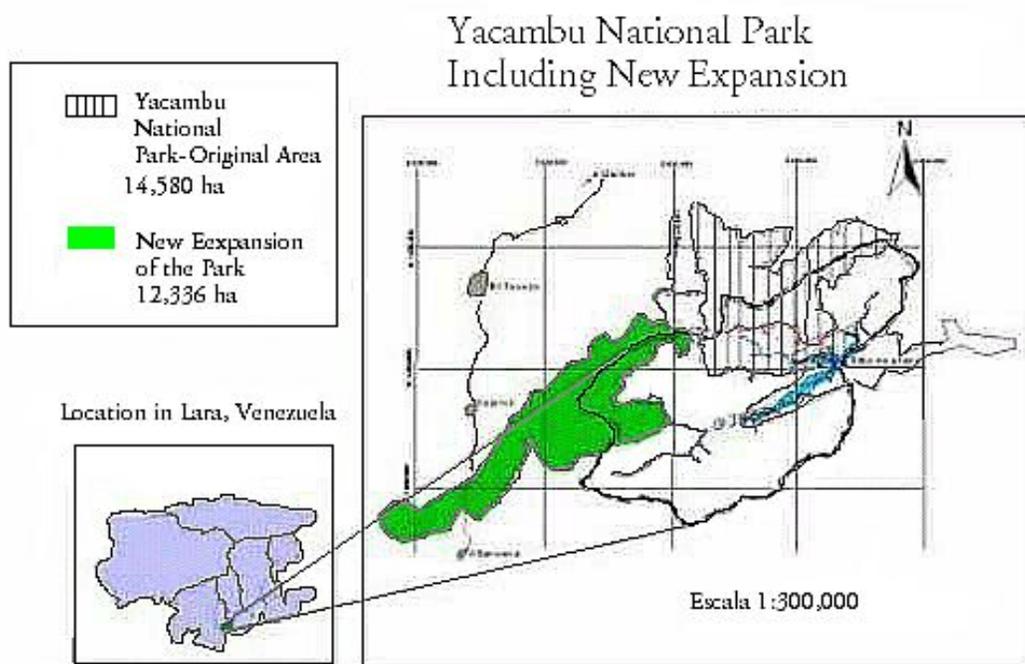
Yacambú National Park is located on the southern slope of the Portuguesa Cordillera in the state of Lara, south of Quibor Valley. Legally, the park contains 26,916 ha; however, at the time of ParksWatch's on-site evaluation in April 2001, the additional 12,336 ha that were added in 1999 were not being managed as part of the park by INPARQUES, the organization overseeing national parks in Venezuela, so this profile does not include this additional area.

Elevation ranges from 500 to 2,000 m above sea level. This large elevation gradient results in a vast array of vegetation types. Because most of the park is above 1000 meters above sea level, the primary vegetation type is cloud forest, although other habitats do exist. In the northern sector xeric species are prevalent. From 500 to 700 meters in elevation semi-deciduous forests are dominant, and at the lower altitudes grasslands and savannas. The climate of Yacambú is cool, with an average annual temperature of 20.6° C. It receives an average precipitation of 2,040 mm with most rain falling between April and November.

A unique natural feature exists in the northern mountains where an accumulation of Pyrite minerals produces a chemical reaction when in contact with humid air. This generates a sulfur vapor, which forms a column of smoke. As a result, this area is known as the "Fumarola." This natural phenomenon has been reported since colonial times and is one of the park's most popular tourist attractions. The "smoke" is clearly visible from the town of Sanare, 10 kilometers away.

Located within the Park are 7,234 ha of the Yacambú River watershed (officially 11,234 ha with the 1999 expanded area included), which will provide water for the Yacambú-Quibor Hydrologic Dam, being constructed just outside the southern border of the park. The river's main channel will be redirected to fill a 250-hectare reservoir behind the dam. Eventually, a 27 km tunnel, now under construction, will channel water from the reservoir to the desertic Quibor Valley. This huge project is dependent on the protection of the watershed within the park, which should make the protection of Yacambú a priority for the government.

## Venezuela: Yacambú National Park



*Map of Yacambú National Park*

### *Biodiversity*

Yacambú is home to a diverse array of species, which results from a large elevation gradient and the convergence of three ecosystems: the Andes mountains range, the Coastal mountain range, and the interior plains known as Llanos. The park contains at least 5,000 ha of primary forest with diverse flora. Recently, two tree species rare in Venezuela, *Lafoensia puniceifolia* and *Simira lezamae*, which have been recently described in the Rubiaceae family, have been recorded in the park. In addition, common species like the roble (*Platimiscyum politacyuum*) of the Oak family; the bucaré (*Erythrina poeppigiana*), the chaperon (*Machaerium acuminatum*), and the araguaney (*Tabebuia chrisantha*) are present within the park.

Six hundred distinct plant species have been documented within these forests. Cloud forest tree species include such trees as *Calatola venezuelana*, *Alchornea triplinervia*, *Zanthoxylum ocumarensis*, *Posoqueira coriacea*, *Sloanea caribaea*, *Simira erythroxyton*; ferns from the genus *Cyathea* sp.; and palms of the genera *Geonoma* sp. and *Bactrys* sp.

The high diversity of orchids present in Yacambú National Park is remarkable and has made the park famous with orchidologists. *Raputia larensis*, an orchid endemic to Lara and Yaracuy states, is well represented within Yacambú. Among the orchid species found here is the famous May flower (*Cattleya mosiae*), the national flower of Venezuela.

Yacambú is also the home to various globally and locally endangered and threatened fauna. Two

## Venezuela: Yacambú National Park

globally critically endangered species are the spectacled bear (*Tremarctos ornatus*), the only species of the Ursidae family in South America, and the helmeted curassow bird (*Pauxi pauxi*), one of the most endangered cracids. It is also possible to find locally endangered populations of large cats, such as the jaguar (*Panthera onca*) and the puma (*Felis concolor*). Other mammals present are the paca (*Agouti paca*, *A. taczanowski*), the agouti (*Dasyprocta leporina*), and other small rodents and marsupials.

The park is popular among birdwatchers who are attracted by its 254 species of birds. Of these, four are endemic to Venezuela (*Laterallus levraudi*, *Pyrrhura hoematotis*, *Chloristilbon alice*, and *Sternoclyta cyanopectus*) and 26 are northern migrants. Fifteen butterfly species have also been preliminarily described; among them are the *Caligo* sp. from the family Brossolidae and *Morpho pelleides*, both typical of cloud forests.

Insects, such as sand flies, live within the park and are vectors for various diseases. They transmit diseases such as *Leishmania venezuelensis* and *L. brasiliensis*, which cause cutaneous leishmaniasis. Other diseases carried by insects within the park include *Cisticerco* sp, which causes cisticercosis, and *Aedes aegypti*, a transmitter of hemorrhagic dengue.

### Management

[INPARQUES](#) is responsible for the management and administration of Yacambú. Although the park was established in 1962, Yacambú's management plan was written by INPARQUES in 1995 (Gaceta Oficial de la República de Venezuela, N° 4906 Extraordinario, decreto N° 669). It describes park regulations and outlines eight distinct zones within the park, their boundaries and legal uses. In addition, the management plan establishes measures to ensure that specific regulations of each zone will be enforced. The newly expanded area of the park does not yet have a management plan, and for all intents and purposes, it is not considered by INPARQUES to be part of the park.

The eight zones described in the plan are:

- Integral Protection Zone (PI): Access is restricted to INPARQUES staff for monitoring and scientific research. The only activities allowed are scientific studies and environmental assessment/monitoring programs. This zone includes all primary rainforest within the park and most of the high elevation areas.
- Primitive and Wilderness Zone (P): Restricted area devoted to authorized activities like scientific research, hiking, posting educational signs, and the maintenance of previously created trails.
- Managed Natural Environment Zone (ANM): Consists primarily of a designated buffer zone between the highway and the park. These are areas that had been subjected to moderate human influence before the park was created. Building basic infrastructure, posting informational signs, vehicle transit, and passive recreation are all permissible activities in this zone.
- Natural Recuperation Zone (R): Dedicated to programs specifically for conservation and restoration of natural resources.
- Recreation Zone (R): Several sectors of the park are favorable for development of low impact recreation. Infrastructure construction is permitted. Three streams popular to visitors have been designated as part of this zone: El Blanquito, El Avileño, and Alto del Viento. Recreation facilities exist along a section of El Blanquito, but there are no facilities along the

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*

other two streams. The trail to the "Fumarola" is also included in this zone, and a nature interpretation trail close to El Blanquito. The capacity of these areas should not exceed one person per 30 square meters.

- Service Zone (S): This zone contains INPARQUES housing and accommodations for park guards and the sectors of Hacha and El Blanquito, as well as tourist facilities.
- Historical, Cultural, and Paleontological Interest Zone (IHC): Consists of zones with historically or culturally significant villages, or areas where petroglyphs have been found and will be assessed and studied in the future.
- Special Use Zone: Consists of areas where current activities are incompatible with park goals, but existed before the park's creation. These areas are categorized as of Special Use because the infrastructure provides some sort of social service that the surrounding communities value. This zone also includes the [Yacambú-Quibor Hydrological Project](#) infrastructure located inside the park, and some non-intensive agricultural sites that were present at the time of the park's creation.

The boundaries of the park are defined on the map but poorly marked in the area. Yacambú is located between 69 ° 30' and 69° 36' W and 9° 38' and 9° 43' N. The management plan establishes measures to ensure that specific regulations of each zone will be enforced. The park and its internal zones have defined boundaries but they are not always effectively marked and distinguishable. Seven park guards from surrounding towns are in charge of monitoring the park. A superintendent (Ing. Luis Emiro Briceño) and a technical assistant (Sr. Luis Chávez) are also on staff. There are two ranger stations but one is closed. The park guards only have one motorcycle to do regular area inspections. In addition they do not have radios or any communication device.

Yacambú was officially increased in 1999 (Decree No. 3.222 in Gaceta E- No. 5.293 of the 26 of January, 1999), from 14,580 ha to 26,916 ha. There is an existing draft that still needs the approval of some affected parts, however this procedure has been delayed for more than a year.

### *Human influence*

There are no legal communities within the park, although several illegal settlements do exist. Before the creation of the park in 1962, numerous subsistence farms and small coffee plantations were located in southern Yacambú. People continued living there until 1985 when they were relocated to land outside the park. In 1991, there still were 13 farms and 87 people within the park at Cerro Cojón and just outside the park in Escalera, but since then they, too, have been relocated. In spite of the relocations, in recent years, several families have entered the park and squatted on parkland.

Numerous farms and towns surround the park, primarily near the southern boundary where many of the former park inhabitants were relocated. Most of these settlements, although located within one km of the park, are too small to be a significant threat. Sanare, with 11,000 people, is the largest town near the park boundary, and is important to the region both historically and economically. The main economic activity is coffee cultivation, which has been grown in the region since the 18th century. In the past, indigenous peoples of the region cultivated cotton. Today, people cultivate primarily potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*), tomatoes (*Lycopersicon esculentum*), and cauliflower (*Brassica oleracea*). Many farms around the park use conventional farming methods, which are not in accordance with sustainable soil and water conservation. These inappropriate farming practices

## ***Venezuela: Yacambú National Park***

are affecting the Yurubí River, but not the water within the park.

One road crosses the park from Sanare to the dam outside the park. This road is used infrequently and, in comparison to roads in other parks, is neither a threat nor a source of contamination for Yacambú. The main users of the road are the dam construction workers, the campesinos from nearby towns, and visitors to the park.

### *Tourism*

Yacambú has not yet taken advantage of its great ecotourism potential. Both national and international tourists frequently visit the park, attracted by the spectacular avifauna. The area around El Blanquito lagoon is most popular with national tourists, especially during the weekends and holidays, and they pay an entrance fee of US\$2 per person. Overall, the park averages 250 tourists per week (13,000 a year), the majority during holidays. Accommodations consist of seven houses at El Blanquito that hold 70 people. The Blanquito information center contains the superintendent's office, a ranger station, and the new educational center. The new center, currently under construction, will increase the number of tourists that can be hosted in this area to 100. This recreation zone has a trail in the forest with signs describing the vegetation and other characteristics of the ecosystem. The trail was designed for tourism, but it could be an important tool for environmental education. El Blanquito has several tourist facilities, such as bathrooms, picnic tables, and parking areas, which are currently being upgraded. A new trail in the forest was recently constructed to be used for recreational and monitoring purposes.

### *Yacambú -Quibor Hydrologic Project*

As previously mentioned, Yacambú-Quibor Hydrologic Dam is being constructed just outside the southern portion of the park. The dam will create the Yacambú Reservoir, whose water will be transported to the Quibor Valley for agricultural purposes. The primary owner of the dam is the Ministry of the Environment, which administers INPARQUES, the agency in charge of Venezuela's National Parks. Obviously, the Ministry of the Environment is aware of the importance of preserving the Yacambú River basin, 35% of which is contained in the new area added to the park in 1999. The Yacambú-Quibor Hydrologic Project has developed an extensive program dedicated to conservation, management, and administration of the Yacambú watershed, including this new section of the park. They are collaborating on the creation of a new management plan and regulations for use of the park, including new maps, and social and environmental impacts statements. The program also aims to control growth and agriculture activities in surrounding towns.

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*



*Incompleted Yacambú-Quibor hydrologic dam*

### *Conservation and Research*

Yacambú National Park is an ideal place to research cloud forests. Research has been conducted by several universities in the areas of ecology, biogeography of rodents, tourism, geology, botany, and zoology. Carlsen (1999) lists 19 research projects that have been conducted in Yacambú. The Audubon Society of Venezuela published a "Birds of the Park Checklist" in 1998, which serves as a tool for research and recreation. The Society of Orchidologists of Venezuela has also carried out inventories within the park and visits regularly. The conservation organization Fudena has been working in the five national parks in the Portuguesa Cordillera to promote an ecological corridor to link the parks. BioParques, ParksWatch's partner in Venezuela, is also working in the Portuguesa Cordillera on the creation of the National Parks Allies Network. A coalition of NGOs along with [Simón Bolívar University](#) researchers are developing a plan for sustainable use of the Portuguesa Cordillera, which includes Yacambú and four other national parks of the region.

### **Threats**

Yacambú is considered vulnerable, meaning that although urgent solutions are not needed at this time, ParksWatch recommends continued monitoring of existing low-level threats in order to ensure the protection and maintenance of biological diversity in the medium-term future.

The most significant threats are:

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*

- Lack of adequate infrastructure and personnel
- Human encroachment
- Lack of signs
- Poaching
- Forest fires
- Timber extraction

### *Lack of adequate infrastructure and personnel*

Seven park guards are responsible for protecting the entire park. The guards work in cramped conditions in the park's only guard station, which at the time of ParksWatch's visit was being remodeled into an information center. The guards lack adequate means of transportation and, as a result, their ability to monitor and apprehend those breaking park regulations is limited. Currently, they make their rounds either on foot or by motorcycle, which prevents the complete monitoring of hard-to-reach boundary areas. In fact, several areas of the park have recently been invaded and burned, due in large part to the inability of INPARQUES personnel to secure the borders. In addition, no new staff have been hired or infrastructure planned for the recently expanded areas of the park.



*Old ranger station at El Blanquito*

### *Human Settlement*

## ***Venezuela: Yacambú National Park***

The encroachment of people into national parks and private lands is a recent phenomenon in Venezuela. Most people invade park lands with the purpose of starting a new settlement, while others are farmers wishing to expand their agricultural lands. In Yacambú, approximately 60 families have settled on 200 ha in the sectors Cerro Cojón, Guayabal, and Volcancito. One park guard confirmed to ParksWatch that numerous people were relocated out of the park 10 years ago and received ample compensation for their land. The guard believes that the people squatting inside the park now are only doing so to receive the compensation that the government provides to any person or family that must be relocated, even if they do not officially own the land. Along the road leading to the dam-inside the park-ParksWatch documented 20 new houses in six separate areas.

People who previously lived in the park are resentful towards INPARQUES because they feel that the circumstances surrounding their relocations were not fair. According to one person from the Chamiza community, the parcel of land to which he was relocated was not suitable for coffee cultivation. In addition, water shortages have become a problem in many of the relocation zones and other towns close to the park. The community of Chamiza recently had to ask the superintendent of Yacambú for permission to use water from the park for consumption and irrigation. This discontent felt by previously relocated people is a potential threat for the park. For example, the settlements near Yacambú dam will be relocated after the project is over, and many people have recently moved to these areas, hoping to receive compensation after the construction is finished.

During our visit to Yacambú, we observed new electric cables running from Cubiro in the north of the park to La Escalera, a zone outside the park. The new electric facilities may result in increased encroachments onto park lands because electricity will now be available in a section of the park that previously was not inhabited.

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*



*Plantain plantations in the park*

### *Lack of sign posting*

ParksWatch observed only one official sign indicating the presence of the park during our visit. It was posted by the regional government authorities and did not fulfill the standards for sign posting outlined by INPARQUES and for this reason it was removed one week after it was hung. In general, the borders of the park are not clearly marked, and it is difficult to know exactly where the park begins, except where the park is defined by geographical landmarks.

### *Poaching*

Poaching is one of the most serious problems for the park's biological diversity. Hunters are commonly seen within the park yet are rarely if ever reprimanded. The hunters live in the surrounding villages and hunt for their own consumption. They prefer to hunt the paca (*Agouti paca*), the whitetail deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), and the collared peccary (*Tajassu tajacu*). According to one park guard, most legal conflicts involving park regulations are related to either poaching or fires. In his opinion, the legal proceedings are slow and ineffective because they rarely result in punishments for those who break the law. He believes that these procedures should no longer be a substitute for the arrests and fines that are outlined under Venezuela's Environmental Penal Law. In order to truly uphold the law and punish the perpetrators, park guards need the help of the National Guard, which under Venezuelan law, is responsible for upholding the country's environmental laws. Unfortunately, the park's one National Guard patrol was removed approximately one year ago.

### *Forest fires*

Even though Yacambú was barely affected by the widespread fires that occurred in many parts of Venezuela in 2001, and much of the park is located in high, humid areas, forest fires are still a

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*

serious threat. Most fires that do occur are set by humans outside of the park and then spread across the border into the southern section of the park near the town of Chamiza. During ParksWatch's visit we observed a recently burned area close to this town ([see ParksWatch news](#)).

Having no fire fighters or a fire station within the park prevents INPARQUES from extinguishing fires effectively. The closest fire department is near the town of El Tocuyo located 35 km from the park entrance. In 1995, INPARQUES signed an agreement with the World Bank and received \$55 million to develop projects to improve Venezuela's national park system. One project was to create fire departments in various parks; however, Yacambú was not included among these parks.



*A burned area near the town of Chamiza. Each year forest fires cross the ridge into the park*

### *Timber extraction*

Although logging is neither extensive nor is it done for commercial purposes, it is common for communities surrounding the park to cut and extract timber. In the areas close to the "Fumarola," people often extract stilt palms (*Socratea exorrhizae*) in order to build houses and do artisan work. In Guayabal and La Escalera, the situation is similar; settlers cut wood within the park to construct their homes.

### **Recommended Solutions**

Lack of adequate infrastructure and personnel and signs

In order to efficiently patrol the park, guards suggested that at least five new guards stations be built in the following sectors: Volcanito, Paso Higueros en Cubiro, Moreco, Portal de entrada, and Cerro Negro. In addition, a full team of guards will be needed for the newly added area of the park.

The facilities in the Recreation and Service Zones of El Blanquito are being renovated with funds from [Sobremarcha Ecológica](#), a program of the [Ministry of the Environment](#). This program has invested 60 million Bolívares (US\$67,797) in improvements to Yacambú. A new, larger, and generally more functional, guard station will replace the old one. The El Blanquito Recreation Zone

## *Venezuela: Yacambú National Park*

can now accommodate up to 100 people in its facilities, which include a new training center for up to 30 park guards and a newly constructed conference room. The kiosks around Blanquito Lake also have been remodeled in order to provide more amenities for visitors.



*New facilities for visitors in El Blanquito: picnic area and overnight accommodations*

Insufficient sign posting is another problem, which should be remedied by the Sobremarcha Ecológica program. New signs began to be posted in June and will continue being posted throughout the park until the end of this year.

### *Human encroachment and poaching*

In order to prevent new human settlements, poaching, and other problems related to inefficient monitoring, it is imperative to increase not only the number of park guards, but also the number of government officials that are willing to work to improve the park. Also necessary is the reestablishment of National Guard patrols within the park, to assist park guards with monitoring. An additional measure to facilitate monitoring is the construction of a new trail, an idea promoted by the Yacambú superintendent. This trail will enable patrols to monitor El Calavario, Mesal, and Moreco, sectors currently only accessible by car. The trail also could be used for eco-tourism purposes.

Human encroachments into park and private lands are becoming increasingly problematic in Venezuela. Any solution must involve cooperation among, the National Guard, INPARQUES, the Ministry of Environment, regional governments and the invaders. Because of the mistrust that many settlers feel towards INPARQUES, ParksWatch recommends soliciting an NGO to act as a liaison between the two groups. This method has been successful in Henri Pittier National Park, where The Tierra Viva Foundation, a Venezuelan NGO, has organized workshops and meetings with park inhabitants.

### *Forest fires*

The ability to of INPARQUES to prevent and extinguish fires needs to be improved. ParksWatch suggests that park management follows the example of Avila National Park and forms a Yacambú

## ***Venezuela: Yacambú National Park***

fire department. The Avila fire department consists of a small group of professionals who have a network of able volunteers to work on search and rescue missions. During the rainy season, when the threat of fire is low, the staff conducts training programs on how to prevent forest fires. The success of the program is primarily due to the large number of volunteers and citizens concerned with the park's well being.

The Yacambú-Quibor Hydrologic Company--of which the Ministry of the Environment is part of--is concerned with fire prevention and could prove helpful in the development of a fire department specifically for the park. INPARQUES is currently working on fire protection plans for Yacambú and this past year built a fire barrier on the boundary of the park and the village of Chamiza. This barrier protected the area of the park that is usually burned every year. Despite these efforts, more attention should be given to the threat of forest fires so that Yacambú does not suffer the fires that many Venezuelan parks have had in the past.

### **Conclusion**

Despite several low-level threats, Yacambú experiences significantly less problems than most Venezuelan parks, and currently is protecting the biological integrity of its ecosystems. The relocation of former park inhabitants should be considered successful, and the absence of traffic on the park's only road, prevents the contamination problems found in other Venezuelan parks. Despite the generally strong conservation status of Yacambú, it is necessary to work to resolve problems now while they are still manageable and minimal threats to the park's biological integrity.

The most serious threat to the park is new settlers, which is a result of the inadequate amount of infrastructure and number of personnel needed to monitor and protect the park. This will become a much bigger problem once the newly expanded section of the park is implemented. It is possible that these inefficiencies could be resolved easily through funding from the World Bank project, earmarked specifically for improving Venezuela's parks. In addition, the Yacambú-Quibor Dam Company is aware of the environmental importance of the park, and could be another source of funding to hire more personnel and to buy equipment. If the number of park guards is increased and their equipment improved, Yacambú should remain one of the best-protected parks in Venezuela.

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