RAPTOR RESEARCH IN THE LAND OF MAYANS

By Glenn Oakley

Raptor biology graduate students Jason Sutter and Theresa Panasci study birds of prey in Guatemala in order to help understand and save the region's rapidly deteriorating ecosystem. But their research transcends conservation ecology as they work with descendants of the Mayans in a country imbued with mystery.

"It's definitely a cultural exchange," says Sutter, who joined the graduate program after working two years for The Peregrine Fund's Maya Project as a volunteer and assistant.

Since its creation in 1987, BSU's graduate program in raptor biology and ecology has given students an opportunity to study birds of prey from as close as the Birds of Prey Natural Area 20 miles south of the campus to the island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The international projects are sponsored by The Peregrine Fund, which is based at the World Center for Birds of Prey south of Boise.

Whereas many other organizations use the local people as only manual labor, says Sutter, the Maya Project has brought native Guatemalans into the project as researchers. "I learn more from them than they do from me," he says. "They know the forest like the back of their hand. It's their backyard."

Panasci, who is in her second year of studying roadside hawks, relies on several assistants from the village of Caoba to help search for and monitor the birds in the forest and slash-and-burn fields. "They know what vines in the forest you can drink from," she says, adding they once told her which plant leaves to crush to cure a skin rash she had contracted. It worked, she says. They also have a keen eye for the poisonous fer-de-lance snakes that inhabit the forest. "We carry around poison extractors but we've never had to use them," Panasci adds.

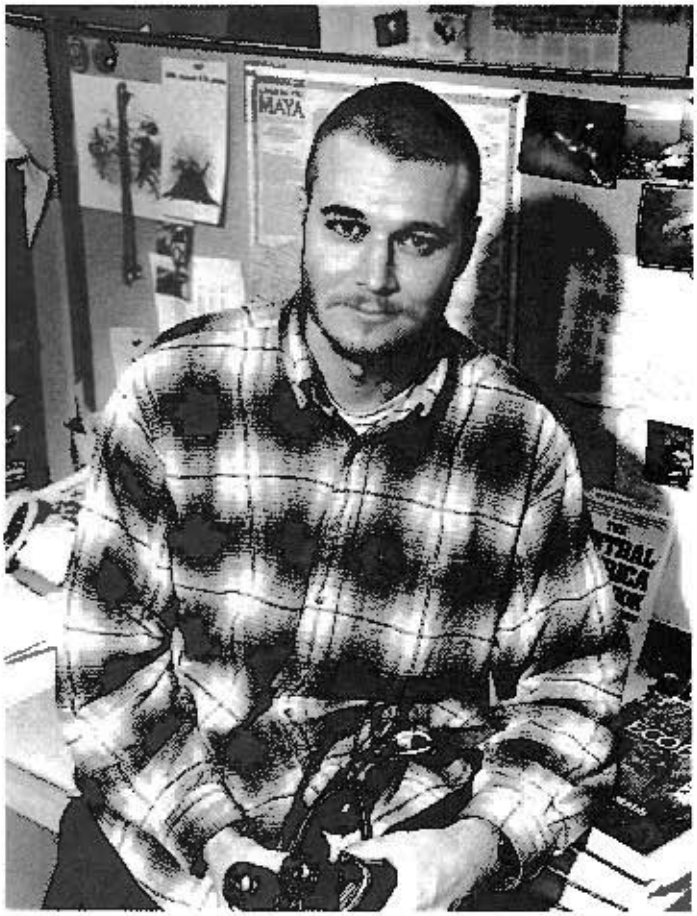
For Sutter, who lived in Venezuela as a child, the sociological impact of his work is as important as the biological research he conducts. "I'm not down there to exploit. It's a sharing. We're creating jobs and creating more tourism by protecting these areas." Panasci notes that Guatemalans who work for the Maya Project usually do not return to slash-and-burn farming. "They talk to people in the village and tell them what we're doing and why it's important," she says. "They love it. They have a higher self-esteem" [after learning to work with computers and scientific equipment]. We hope by educating them, some will go on to do other scientific projects."

The Maya Project recognizes that cooperation of the local people is paramount for long-term conservation to endure. And while many locals "definitely think it's kind of funny" for these "gringos" to chase around after hawks and eagles, Sutter says the Maya Project has a positive reputation in the region. Some of the Guatemalans started working for the Maya Project when they were in high school. Now, six years later, many are in college and continue to work with raptors. They are now adamant about protecting the wildlife of their country, he says.

THERESA PANASCI PHOTO

Sutter is studying the ornate hawk eagle, the black hawk eagle, the great black hawk, the black and white hawk, and the white hawk. These raptors inhabit the high gallery forests of the uplands and the tangled, nearly impenetrable forests of the lowlands. Both ecosystems are threatened by the continued cutting of trees by Guatemalan farmers fleeing the poverty of the altiplano country to the south.

With local assistants Sutter is trapping and radio collaring the raptors to learn how and where they hunt. The nests will be monitored to identify prey species brought to the young and to observe the chicks' development and behavior. For many species of the region, the first step to preserving them is the basic study of their life history: what sort of habitat they require and how much of it.



CHUCK SCHILLER PHOTO

BSU graduate student Jason Sutter is conducting research on Guatemala's declining birds of prey, such as the one at lower left.

Panasci is comparing the roadside hawk in both the forest of Tikal National Park and in the slash-and-burn farming country nearby. Little is known about the natural history of the roadside hawk. An adaptable raptor, it can survive in both the wilderness forests as well as disturbed agricultural areas. "We want to see how this changing environment affects the hawk," says Panasci.

The age of discovery has not passed in these remote parts of the world. Little is known about even the most common raptors, like Panasci's subject, the roadside hawk. In the jungles of Guatemala, living in a camp of tents and thatched-roof huts, Panasci says that despite the stinging insects, poisonous snakes and sharply spiked trees she feels privileged to study a part of that world and help protect it.