

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Rescuing Lucia – A Tapir for Sale on the Web

By Adrian Benedetti

“In the forests of Darién a baby female tapir of approximately 60-80 lbs. was captured. She is in good health. Those interested must provide transportation out of Darien. Animal is currently in the town of Boca del Tigre.

Price: 2,500”

Two weeks earlier, when I originally was notified about the case, the price was \$ 1,000. I had no idea tapirs were in such high demand when I first spoke with the middleman. We first talked when I was verifying if this whole “sale” was true. It wasn't hard to get his personal information since the man had posted his name address and cell phone number on the Internet. In the short conversation he informed me that the tapir was in a distant location and needed to be transported down the Chucunaque River. He said he first needed to contact his brother in law in Darién in order to see which day he could obtain a boat to travel down river. He would keep me posted.

I really couldn't get a read on the situation. Either these guys were incredibly stupid or extremely confident that no one was going to do anything. I mean, here they were providing all the necessary information for a conviction... on the world wide web! Now there are a couple of reasons why I was notified, instead of the national environmental authorities: I'm the director of the national nature park which has a tapir collection and the gentleman that notified me is a key advisor to the foundation in charge of running it. The second is because it was a national holiday weekend when the posting was made, hence all government agencies were closed. While passing as the manager of a rich man's private animal collection, I had no way knowing if these guys would realize I was lying or, for that matter, of knowing whether they really had a tapir. Many here in Panama mistake an owl for a Harpy Eagle, so you can imagine my level of skepticism and complete bewilderment.

While I waited to be contacted, I talked to the local authorities and some friends at the Houston Zoo about how to proceed. It was decided that I had to go

to Darién, since I had already made the initial contact. I would go along with the middleman, a vet (in order to insure the immediate inspection of the animal) and undercover personnel from Panama's National Environmental Service (ANAM). We would travel in an unmarked car and arrest the men once the animal was safely in our custody.

A week passed and I spoke to the middleman and he said it was on for the weekend. I called ANAM and relied this information. I called the middleman back to confirm. He told me it was off because the canoe was going to be used to transport agricultural products before the dry season came in and the water levels in rivers started to drop. I called ANAM and told them it was off.

At this point I was beginning to think they were on to me. Why on earth would you put \$ 2,500 on hold for crops? I thought, for sure, that would be the last I would hear from them. That was a Friday. On Tuesday of the next week I got a call saying it was on again for that Sunday.



Fig. 1. Rescued Lucia.

Come Friday morning I thought that everything was in place for Sunday. ANAM informed me that they had the car and an undercover official that would accompany me. I had the vet and about \$ 500 just in case. Friday evening I got a call saying the car had broken down and the official was nowhere to be found. Late Saturday morning an apprentice vet, an ex Noriega body guard, the middleman and myself were on our way to Darién in a rented car with the telephone number for the ANAM Darién office.

Since the confiscation I've been asked several times if these men knew that what they were doing was illegal. I know for sure the middleman was aware,

because he warned me several times that I would need permits to get the tapir out of Darién, since there are several check points along the one and only road. By road I'm referring to the Panamerican Highway that begins in Alaska stops in the Darién and begins again in Colombia and goes all the way down South America. These checkpoints are in place to check for the smuggling of contraband, drugs, animals, wood, diseases and people. I told him not to worry, it was all taken care of; meanwhile I had no clue what we were going to do.

We arrived in Metetí, Darién, in the late afternoon and the plan was for me to meet secretly with the local ANAM officials and plan out the next day's operation. After dinner the rest of the party settled down to watch T.V. I excused myself by saying I needed to call my boss. None of the public telephones worked and I had no cell phone reception so I just walked down to the station I had seen earlier when we drove through town. Once there, ANAM officials and I sat down to plan out the next morning. There were three players in this operation: ANAM, the local police, and us. The reason for needing the police was that ANAM did not have the training to carry out the arrest. They were going to leave at 5 am to make sure they were there before us. We would leave at 7 am, go straight to port, inspect the animal, and put her safely in the car which was the signal for the police to come out and make the arrests. Once arrested, the detainees would be transported to the ANAM station for processing and we would be escorted out of Darién in order to avoid any problems with the checkpoints.

I went back to the hotel a little nervous and sat down to watch TV with the rest of my traveling companions. The middleman never suspected a thing. They informed me the hotel had Direct TV. I asked if I could change the channel. There was a game I wanted to watch. I flipped a few channels and relaxed a little watching the Denver Broncos play the Buffalo Bills in the middle of Darién.

The next morning everything went just as planned. The ANAM personnel told me it was the first animal trafficking arrest made since the new law came into affect. The new law provided a basis for penalizing offenders, which includes jail time and fines. Before, they would only confiscate whatever the person was trafficking and let him go.

Lucia, so named in honor of the person that originally found the notice on the net, was a little malnourished and showed minor scrapes and scratches from all the moving around. She has now gained eight pounds and her medical tests came out perfect. She is now the sixth member of the tapir family at Summit Nature Park, Panama.

This is a perfect example of why it is so important to invest in creating good zoos in developing countries. In these countries, individuals and well organized NGO's can have a direct impact on what is going on.

These countries are both the battlegrounds and the classrooms where quality information needs to be exchanged between institutions, the public and policy makers. What was done for Lucia is a drop of water in the ocean compared to what could be achieved with generation after generation of proper monitoring and conservation actions. Parks like the Summit Nature Park, Panama, will provide a space and a will for that.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Brian Boyer Raises \$ 450 for Tapirs

By *Gilia Angell*

Brian Boyer of Ohio, is one cool 14-year old. He contacted TSG out of the blue asking if we could share any printable materials because he was raising funds for tapir conservation! He explains his motivation and experience in creating tapir awareness: "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that it was critical for a person to have discovered something in life for which it was worth dying... I have found that something in a recent visit to Costa Rica with my family... There are many endangered species in our world. And one of them is the tapir."

Back home, after a lot of research on the tapir, he and his mother organized a "Save the Tapir Drive". By selling "LIVEstrong" type bracelets at school and public places, the Boyer family made \$ 450 for the Tapir Specialist Group. Brian's dad John made a check available for TSG at the Houston Zoo in May 2006.

A detailed report will be published in the next issue of *Tapir Conservation*.

Thank you, Brian! We are so grateful to have tapir advocates like you!

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