

# NICARAGUAN PARKS - FOR THE PEOPLE

BY PETER FELDSTEIN

National parks have formed a fundamental part of nature conservation and recreation in North America since the founding of Yellowstone over a century ago. This is not the case, however, in many countries of the developing world where the idea of conservation has a scant history and few, if any, nature preserves are established. Natural areas are forsaken in the interest of food production or, more frequently, resource exploitation by multinational corporations. As a contrast to this pattern, the Central American country of Nicaragua has been developing, since the advent of the Sandinista government in 1979, a large and varied system of parks remarkable both for their beauty and their attention to the needs of Nicaraguans.

On my trip to Nicaragua this summer, I had a chance to visit the centrepiece of this system, the Volcan Masaya. This park was originally established under the Somoza dictatorship in 1975 with the foreign tourist in mind: paved roads traverse it from the park entrance to the edge of the volcano crater (this in a country where few people own cars). The present progressive government is encouraging local use, and now groups of school children represent 30% of the park's visitors.

The park features an active and several extinct volcanoes, lava flows, and lush vegetation. Bird species include cotingas, squirrel cuckoos, gnatcatchers and the fabulous long-tailed motmot. A population of parakeets of the genus *Aratinga* actually nest inside the crater of the volcano, flying to and fro amid the cloud of escaping gases. A pleasant vertigo overcomes the human observer who watches their effortless flight from above. It is said that these birds pair for life; during my visit, I almost never observed an odd-numbered flock.

The largest park in Nicaragua is Saslaya, part of the newly-formed 110,000 hectare Bosawas reserve. This park is important for its pristine mountain cloud-forest containing some of Central America's most endangered species - the ocelot, jaguar, tapir, mountain lion and quetzal.

A coastal park, Chacocente, will preserve the nesting grounds of the Pacific Ridley sea turtle. This creature, for some reason, nests at only a few Pacific sites at huge densities. Tens of thousands of turtles will occupy a kilometer of beach for several days every month. The nesting grounds at Chacocente are highly vulnerable to human disturbance during this period and were thus a high priority for Nicaraguan conservation.

Nicaragua's humanist approach to parks is exemplified by its development of Isla Zapatera, an island in Lake Nicaragua. This park contains many pre-Columbian stone carvings as well as a rich flora, including several orchid species which may be unique to the island. It is also home to several hundred peasants who have farmed and fished there for many years. Normal procedure for a park would be to move these people from the land, but this does not suit the Nicar-