

Gauchos of the Grasslands: safeguarding nature and culture

How do the cowboys of South America, legendary figures known as gauchos, provide the solution to saving millions of grassland birds?

From the prairies of the North to the pampas of the South, hundreds of unlikely bedfellows from across the Americas attended the Ranchers' Gathering in southern Brazil last month. This annual event attracts conservationists, farmers, corporations and governments; traditional thinking would position these groups as enemies who are constantly fighting over land, but for the past nine years they have set aside differences in ideology and agenda to meet, discuss and share ideas. The aim: to find robust solutions to save the rich cultural and natural diversity that is harboured within grasslands.

This progressive, new way of thinking is spearheaded by the Southern Cone

Grasslands Alliance—a BirdLife initiative lead by Partners Aves Argentina, Aves Uruguay, SAVE Brasil and Guyra Paraguay. The Alliance recognises that collaboration is often the only way to protect biodiversity in the long term; it aims to ensure that farmers of the Southern Cone continue their traditional practices, so that the grasslands are not destroyed by rampant agricultural intensification.

Pampas grasslands now represent one of the most critically endangered ecosystems in Latin America but receive little conservation attention. Nicolas Marchand, coordinator of the Alliance, said: "The aim is to show that the grasslands can be more productive when well managed, more profitable and friendly

to biodiversity." By working across the four countries with over 400 gauchos—the iconic cowboys of South America—their mission is to prove that cattle grazing can help to maintain the diverse mosaic of long, short and tussock grasslands on which millions of birds depend.

Why do grasslands need traditional farming?

The pampas grasslands of the Southern Cone are recognised as a conservation priority in the Neotropics. Originally they covered an area equivalent to the size of California and Texas combined, stretching across Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Sadly, only half these grasslands remain in good condition, while the rest have been either severely

depleted or destroyed by the soybean, wheat and corn crops that supply the food and biofuel industry, or afforested with species alien to the pampas, like pine and eucalyptus. These monocultures, devoid of richness and diversity, impede the grasslands' ability to produce clean water, retain seed and genetic banks, build resilience to climate change, provide habitats for wildlife and create biomass for high quality meat. This is the real enemy that traditional ranchers and conservationists must stand united against.

Less than 2% of the grasslands in the Southern Cone have any protected area status, despite the ecosystem being of global importance for biodiversity conservation and home to over 400 species of

The Southern Cone is still a wildlife haven: Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus* (R Moller)



birds. With a similar story in North America, where less than 20% of native grasslands remain intact, it is no surprise that birds dependent on grasslands represent the largest group of avian species on the decline in the Americas. Bird diversity collapses from hundreds of species to a handful when a crop like soybean replaces rich native grasses.

But all is not lost. The Southern Cone is still a wildlife haven. Charismatic South American birds, such as the flightless ostrich-like Greater Rhea *Rhea americana*, thrive alongside North American migrants that journey here for the winter, including Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*, Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis*, and Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*. The

grasses provide food, shelter and breeding grounds for an important number of endemic and globally threatened birds, such as Saffron Cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus*, Black and White Monjita *Xolmis dominicanus*, and Pampas Meadowlark *Sturnella defilippii*. Once roaming in their millions, Pampas Deer *Ozotoceros bezoarticus* still hang onto survival, while top predators Puma *Puma concolor* and Maned Wolf *Chrysocyon brachyurus* prowl among the tussocks.

With this wealth of wildlife at urgent risk, you may wonder why the Grasslands Alliance isn't focused on creating protected areas. Unfortunately, it is not a viable solution in the Southern Cone as 95% of the land is privately owned

and used for agricultural production. If gauchos can no longer traditionally farm their land and make a profit, the reality is that they will convert, sell or rent it for financial gain, thereby destroying the integrity of this rich grassland ecosystem.

So, what's the solution? Faced with this threat, the Grasslands Alliance discovered that the gauchos' cultural connection to the land is the key to saving it. "The farming community want to continue rearing cattle here because it's a deeply rooted part of their culture", explains Nicolas. The gauchos have been on this land as far back as the 16th century, when horsemen from Spain emigrated to the Southern Cone. They survived by hunting wild cattle but

over time established farms and nurtured a rich culture of music, folklore and fashion. The gauchos became greatly admired and renowned in legends and literature, portrayed as strong, brave and defiant. To this day, they play an important symbolic role in the nationalist feelings of the region.

Despite this, their cultural connection to the land is under threat. Nicolas adds: "There is a great financial pressure and temptation to convert the land, to make it more profitable over the short term, or to sell it to multinational companies and move to urban environments, where life is perceived as easier. But we want to show farmers that there is an alternative. Regional research has shown that meat production yields



Cock-tailed Tyrant
Aletrurus tricolor
(Pete Morris)

have and are fond of the land that they farm.” In this kingdom of the gaucho, it is keenly felt that if the traditional farming culture is lost then the rich grassland habitat will be lost with it.

Turning enemies into allies

The challenge facing the Grasslands Alliance was to get the farmers on board and convince them that conservationists—historically the enemy—

genuinely were concerned for their livelihoods and best interests. “In the beginning, it was a bit hard for them to believe us”, admits Nicolas. “They couldn’t understand why we wanted them to continue farming the land and to produce more meat. Never mind that we wanted to help them make it more productive and profitable because we are convinced that farmers are the key champions of grassland conservation. But after a lot of talking over the years and

showing them how it can be done, it appears to be they now trust us.”

Initially, the Grasslands Alliance worked with farmers and expert technicians on 10 pilot sites, all within Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). They experimented with a variety of different approaches to land management—such as variable stocking rates, rotational grazing, restoration of native grasslands and use of fire as a management tool—to understand better how these practices impacted soil health, water quality and carbon sequestration.

With the results they developed best practices that guarantee productivity, placing more attention on growing healthy native grasses, controlling grazing, and enhancing natural seeding, while ensuring there is sufficient and thriving natural habitat for birds and other wildlife. The initiative has been so popular with farmers that membership of the Alliance grew from 100 to 400 in just 12 months between 2013 and 2014, resulting in 400,000 hectares

of grassland across the four countries now being managed under best practice guidelines.

Launching bird-friendly beef

With all this land now being managed sustainably, the Alliance has established a brand of bird-friendly, grass-fed beef that will command a premium price in South America and internationally. The challenge is to reverse the trend of “feedlot beef” that has captured most of the market and involves feeding confined cattle on soy and grain, much of which is grown on former rich, native grasslands.

The certification scheme for the beef was developed by experts across the four countries: it ensures that the farms are biodiversity-friendly and have preserved at least 50% of their natural grasslands. To date, 350 farms have been certified across the four countries, meaning that a total of 327,000 hectares of grasslands are now producing bird-friendly beef.

Last year, the first export of certified beef was launched onto the European market through the supplier Zandbergen

can improve threefold solely as a result of good management practices.” The aim is to ensure that the gauchos’ cattle can continue to control the grasses, doing the work that the region’s original herbivores once performed.

“We cannot save the grasslands without the gaucho farmers”, said Nicolas. “The farmers that we work with are the only reason that we have any grassland left at all. They are very proud of what they



World's Finest Meat, based in the Netherlands, with Swedish consumers being the first to sample the product. The Grasslands Alliance and Zandbergen are now exploring an agreement with the Rainforest Alliance to create a joint certification process that could greatly enhance the brand's visibility within the European market. The beef is already being sold in provinces of Argentina and will soon be available in Brazil's Walmart supermarkets.

"We are not in the meat marketing business", comments Nicolas. "But we do need to show the value of what traditional farmers are doing. It is not only an economic value, but an environmental and social value too. Through the Alliance, we are showing that there is pride in what they do—they are not just doing it for themselves but also for the benefit of wider society."

Rewards for conservation action

To show how Grasslands Alliance farms are beneficial for everyone living on the pampas and to ensure that



Key to success? Getting farmers on board by showing them that conservationists were concerned for their livelihoods and best interests (Alianza del pastizal)

farmers are rewarded for their conservation achievements, the Alliance developed a Grassland Conservation Index (GCI). This statistical tool evaluates the contribution that a particular farm is having towards the conservation of the regional grassland ecosystem, by looking at factors such as the purity of the farm's grasslands in terms of exotic versus native species, the agricultural biodiversity of the farm and where the farm is located in terms of priority conservation sites.

It was endorsed by the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment of six governments within the Southern Cone. This backing helped the Grassland Alliance get funding from the Inter American Development Bank to apply the index to 400 farms. The next stage is to help the governments develop incentives for farmers who are shown to be contributing to biodiversity conservation, such as tax reductions or payments for environmental services for those farmers who achieve a high index score.

The GCI has been an extremely effective way of getting governments across the Southern Cone involved in the work of the

Grasslands Alliance. "Initially the governments were only timidly supportive of our aims", says Nicolas. "But now they are beginning to see that the Alliance approach is very much aligned to their own commitments. It is a win-win situation; we are not telling farmers that they cannot use the land but instead we are finding ways to make their productive activities more effective and profitable, while ensuring they are also friendly to biodiversity. So the governments have come to realise that Alliance is finding many solutions to their problems."

Solutions sweeping the Americas

The Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance is recognised across the Americas for finding solutions to complex environmental, economic and social issues. The chance to learn from the Alliance and its on-the-ground experience is what attracted over 460 registered participants to the Ranchers' Gathering in November. There is a sense of hopeful anticipation that the success in the Southern Cone will sweep into the savannas of Bolivia, across the llanos plains of Colombia, up through Mexico's grasslands, until they reach the prairies of the US

and Canada. It is ambitious. But millions of birds—from endemics to migrants—depend on it.

BirdLife International wants to drive this hemispheric approach to grasslands conservation, as part of their global commitment to protecting migratory birds and flyways. It depends on their partners across the Americas working together, while finding conservation champions across sectors: from farmers to governments, corporations to academics. They must break down barriers and build trust, while encouraging a diversity of voices who will find new and insightful solutions. They need to make grasslands productive and profitable, while ensuring they are preserved and protected. The Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance is the trailblazer, showing what can be achieved. There are many challenges to be overcome, but the birds of the Americas need conservation cowboys more than ever.

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By Bethan John

Further reading online

Grassland Alliance www.alianzadelpastizal.org/en/



Ensuring there is sufficient and thriving natural habitat for wildlife through controlling grazing is at the heart of the Grassland Alliance work (Alianza del pastizal)