

William G. Conway

In memoriam: William G. Conway (1929-2021)

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The Flamingo Specialist Group was deeply saddened to learn that Dr. William G. Conway passed away on October 21, 2021. Throughout his long, productive career, Dr. Conway redefined the relevance of contemporary zoos and aquariums, highlighting their role in education and conservation. He spent most of his career at the Wildlife Conservation Society (known until 1993 as the New York Zoological Society). Under his leadership, WCS grew to overseeing 350 projects in 52 countries, though he took special interest in the Southern Cone of the Americas. The lonely beauty of Patagonia — ostensibly his favorite place — with its vast plains and wildlife spectacles, kept bringing him back. But the grand vistas, unforgiving environment, and singular wildlife of the high Andean plateau or *altiplano*, home to three species of flamingo, the Chilean, Andean, and James's (puna), also captured his imagination.



Photo credit: G.Harris/WCS.

Dr. Conway first traveled to the altiplano in 1960 at the urging of famed ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson, who had photographed the James's (puna) flamingo, at the time thought to be the rarest flamingo in the world, two years earlier in Laguna Colorada, Bolivia. Petersen claimed to be the first person to have seen all six species of the world's flamingos in the wild, an accomplishment that Dr. Conway would later attain. The expedition lead by Chilean naturalist

Luis Peña was meant to capture James's flamingos and bring them back to WCS's Bronx Zoo. After several days of trial-and-error trapping in the perilous conditions of the high-altitude desert, the team successfully captured 20 James's flamingos and transported them back to New York. A few months later, the Bronx Zoo received two Andean flamingos from Peña, becoming the first zoo to exhibit all six species.

Dr. Conway was captivated by the breathtakingly beautiful altiplano where "a string of spectacular shallow lagoons cradled between to east and west ranges of the Andes is illuminated by the Earth's rarest and most exquisitely beautiful flamingos." Recognizing the uniqueness of this landscape, he worked to help make Laguna Colorada in Bolivia a reserve, officially declared in 1973.

In 1972-1973, under Dr. Conway's advisement, WCS sponsored a global flamingo census coordinated by Philip Kahl, which included field expeditions to the high Andes and generated some of the first global estimates of flamingo populations. In 1980 and 1981, Dr. Conway joined expeditions to Laguna Pozuelos in the Andes of northwestern Argentina, an important feeding area for the three flamingo species. He then worked with the National Parks Administration of Argentina to set up the Laguna Pozuelos National Monument protected area.

In 1985, WCS partnered with the Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF), the agency that oversees protected areas in Chile, to support a lead biologist, several rangers, and infrastructure such as a trailer, trucks, blinds, and other essential equipment for flamingo research and protection. Data collected during the next three years detailed breeding, behavior, and the flamingos' whereabouts becoming the basis for a national flamingo reserve system and conservation plan. During a trip to Chile in 1988 to review the flamingo project's progress, Dr. Conway was struck with the scale of industrial mining for lithium, nitrates, potassium, boron, and molybdenum in the desolate Salar de Atacama, one of the major breeding areas for Andean Flamingos. In addition to directly impacting wetland habitats, mining operations resulted in roads that crisscrossed the area giving entry to predators and illegal egg taking, virtually halting chick production. The flamingo project convinced the Chilean government to protect critically fragile nesting colonies from human disturbance and egg harvest. But what worried Dr. Conway most was the reduction in the Salar's scarce water sources diverted for agriculture and residential development upstream, then further extracted within the wetland basin by mining operations. Without water there are no wetlands, and without wetlands there are no flamingos. Thirty years later, the impacts of reduced water availability on the social-ecological systems of the Salar de Atacama are well documented.

In the mid-1990s, preoccupied with the status of the Andean and puna flamingos, Dr. Conway reached out to local biologists in the region and general agreement was reached on the need for a "flamingo summit" convening delegates from the four range countries, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. The meeting produced an awareness of the need for collaborative conservation across borders of the birds and their wetland habitats and laid the foundation for the establishment of the Grupo de Conservación Flamencos Altoandinos, GCFA (High Andes Flamingos Conservation Group). In 1997, with WCS funding, the GCFA designed and coordinated the first regional,

comprehensive census aimed at simultaneously counting all flamingos in key wetlands throughout the Andean and puna flamingo distributions. These censuses produced the first reliable estimates of global populations for these species, and regular regional simultaneous censuses carried out every five years since then have allowed us to track population trends and monitor wetland habitats over time.

I first met Dr. Conway in 1997 as the regional South American flamingo conservation initiative was coalescing. I was asked to give a seminar on my graduate work on Caribbean Flamingos in Mexico as part of my job interview in the Global Conservation program at WCS. I recognized him in the audience immediately. Seeing Dr. Conway, the Director of the organization, a renowned flamingo expert who was known for making additions and corrections during presentations, I felt nervous to say the least. Although he sat towards the back of the room, he seemed very engaged. At the end of my talk, he introduced himself and asked if I was interested in working with flamingos in South America. I struggled to find an answer... was this a trick question? I don't remember my answer but apparently it helped me land the job. Over the next few months, we had several meetings to discuss flamingo conservation in South America, during which he would recount his expeditions in luxurious detail, and I felt I was living in his travelogues from *Animal Kingdom* and *National Geographic* magazines. He was very generous with his knowledge and contacts, offering to help in any way he could. When the GCFA convened a meeting to plan strategies and the next regional census, Dr. Conway claimed he was "too old" to go to the altiplano and asked me to represent WCS there. This continuation of WCS's commitment to flamingo conservation in South America was for me the beginning a lifelong collaboration that set my career path.

Dr. Conway retired from WCS in 1999, but regularly visited the Bronx Zoo, attended meetings, and eventually he did correct me during a presentation (he was right of course). In 2010, when I returned from a trip to Tanzania having finally seen the lesser flamingo in the wild, checking off the last remaining flamingo species from my list, he smiled, shook my hand, and in his gentlemanly manner he said "welcome to the club of six."

Dr. Conway was very active on the FSG listserv, frequently contributing facts, opinions, and photos related to all topics and species. Once someone posted a photo of a black melanistic flamingo observed in the Middle East which he, typically humorous as he was, dismissed as *Phoenicopterus photoshopsis*. Not to embarrass him, I wrote him privately and told him I had seen that same rare bird on a recent trip to Israel and sent him photos I took of the black flamingo. "Wonderful! I am delighted to be a skeptic, and proven wrong!" he graciously responded.

In 2004 I took a position at the American Museum of Natural History where I continue to work on flamingo conservation with a focus on Andean landscapes. Dr. Conway and I corresponded regularly up until a few months ago. He was keenly watching the lithium mining boom in the altiplano wetlands, a cause for major concern among flamingo conservationists. Just a few weeks ago he called for a meeting among colleagues to discuss potential ways to address this unprecedented and potentially devastating development. His last message to me was "This is a marvelous gathering of data maps and illustrations. Terrific! And greatly appreciated." Despite

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his failing health he remained curious, passionate, and concerned about the altiplano flamingos, and ever the gracious and encouraging mentor. Dr. William Conway's impact and legacy in South America live on but he will be deeply missed by all of us who share his interest in the "the most exquisitely beautiful flamingos."



Photo credit: G.Harris/WCS