



JUAN PAVÓN, THE CAMPAIGN'S MASCOT (ABOVE); GRASSROOTS ACTIVIST  
MARÍA IGNACIA GALEANO IN EL CASTILLO, NICARAGUA (INSET).

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT  
BY JASON HOUSTON

# A Rare Bird

*A U.S. nonprofit partners with a Nicaraguan activist  
in a creative conservation initiative*

*In the summer of 2006, Jason Houston, Orion's picture editor, traveled with Rare, a U.S.-based international conservation organization (and Orion Grassroots Network member), to photograph its Pride program at work in south-eastern Nicaragua.*

ASKED IF HE KNEW THE PAVÓN, a threatened forest bird endemic to Central America, the farmer responded, “*Los veíamos en el bosque, pero ya no tanto.*” We used to see them in the forest, but not so much anymore. The decline of the pavón, or great curassow, driven by hunting, forest burning, and habitat loss and fragmentation, is a tragedy. But for María Ignacia Galeano, it's also an opportunity. And if she has her way, everyone in Nicaragua's greater Río San Juan region will soon know “Juan Pavón,” the mascot around which her conservation education and awareness program is centered.

El Castillo, the town where Galeano lives (and where generations of her family have lived before her), lies at a bend in the Río San Juan on the southwestern border of the twenty-six-hundred-square-kilometer Indio-Maíz Biosphere Reserve. This remote, dense, lowland tropical rainforest preserve comprises one

of the largest and most biologically diverse wild places remaining in Central America. Sparsely populated, the region is rarely visited even by Nicaraguans, much less by foreign travelers who crowd the same ecosystem in nearby Costa Rica, situated just across the Río San Juan.

After Haiti, Nicaragua is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and the Indio-Maíz Biosphere Reserve lies in one of its most distant corners. But as is the case with so many of the last wild places, remoteness is no longer a defense against global appetites. An export economy is building here around natural resources, leading to a host of increasing pressures on the land. African oil palm plantations and large citrus farms, which acidify the soils; hardwood logging and cattle ranching, which clear the forests; the threat of natural gas and oil development—all these activities crowd the Reserve. Combined with a lack of understanding among citizens about development's consequences and an absence of local support for environmental protection, they put the emblematic pavón, and the biodiversity it represents, at risk.

Galeano is tackling this problem one neighbor at a time. In 2004, she partnered with Rare Conservation, an Arlington, Virginia-based nonprofit that brings social marketing techniques and international funding to the aid





of local conservationists around the world. At its core, the Rare strategy is designed to support conservationists who are leading their communities toward a different sense of self-interest. The goal: to get people to choose to act in ways that conserve and protect natural resources. And Rare's approach—undertaken in forty countries so far—relies on these local leaders, rather than outsiders, to implement conservation strategies. Rare brings tools and funding to bear, but individuals like Galeano develop the on-

the-ground tactics. Working with Rare and several Nicaraguan environmental organizations, Galeano has brought to life the Rare Pride game plan of combining traditional education with commercial marketing tactics. She wants to convince her neighbors that protecting the great curassow and its habitat makes sense to them and is their responsibility. If her approach works, Galeano and her partners will make the people of southern Nicaragua champions of Juan Pavón and the places they all share. 🦋



**TAKING IT TO THE COMMUNITY (LEFT):** María Ignacia Galeano's Rare Pride program includes making presentations to farmers, tour guides, teachers, and community leaders. Discussions are built around on-the-ground realities, human needs, and alternative ways of doing things that complement conservation goals.

**LIFE ON THE RIVER (THIS PAGE):** Everything along the Río San Juan relies intimately on the river. Transportation is almost exclusively by boat; in most of the communities no roads exist, only walkways. Homes perch over the same waters that provide much of the region's food.





**THE MAIN CHARACTERS:** A Rare Pride campaign starts with the creation of a mascot—in Galeano's case, Juan Pavón, based on the threatened pavón, or great curassow. This character is featured on a variety of marketing materials, including posters, pins, stickers, t-shirts—and as a seven-foot-tall mascot. But the objective is not just to brand a bird; Juan Pavón, in whatever form he appears, is the entry point for education, conversation, and imagination.







**THEIR OWN FUTURE:** The daughter of a local cattle rancher, Galeano is particularly sensitive to the challenges her neighbors face as they learn to live in ways that are compatible with a healthy ecosystem. One of the objectives of her campaign is to nurture in Nicaraguans the conviction that they can shape their own future.





**THE UBIQUITOUS JUAN PAVÓN:** Galeano's Rare Pride campaign includes more than twenty discrete tactics, from church sermons to public service radio announcements to bumper stickers, all intended to familiarize people with Juan Pavón and to introduce his message. That message is beginning to take root; dancers preparing for the annual *folklorico* festival (above), and this handcraft artist in El Castillo (left), have picked up on the Pavón character and begun to include a conservation theme in their work.

*To see more images of southern Nicaragua's remote Río San Juan region, visit [orionmagazine.org](http://orionmagazine.org).*