Buenos Aires Herald

Leisure&Travel

A wetlands corridor?

An international seminar sees a future in river-based tourism.

PHOTO BY BONNIE TUCKER

In Argentine rivers, many people fish to eat and earn a bit of cash. Some authorities think that well-planned tourism undertakings could help improve their lives and replenish fishery resources.

By Bonnie Tucker
Herald Travel Editor

In Argentina 77 percent of the population lives beside rivers in the River Plate basin formed by the Paraná, Paraguay and Uruguay rivers. In tiny Uruguay and Paraguay the figure is closer to 100 percent, while in landlocked Bolivia and gigantic Brazil it drops to 30 percent. It is estimated that the lives and livelihoods of 95 million people in these five southern South American countries are affected directly or indirectly by water and river management policies.

These statistics were mentioned over the weekend at the International Seminar on Sustainable Wetlands Management in Paraná (Entre Ríos) by Juan José Neiff of CONICET's Centre of Applied Ecology in the River Provinces. They emphasize the importance of water management to people who fish, or are involved in water-based agriculture or tourism operations. It also involves people who pay water bills and work in companies that provide goods and services to an economy whose many sectors depend on the conditions of rivers and other bodies of water.

The floodplains on either side of a flatland river like the Paraná serve as regulators of the flood-drought cycle, storing excess water and releasing it when rains cease. Their earth and sand purify the water as it filters down to replenish aquifers. The nutrient-rich sediments that they collect are spread around the countryside as natural fertilizers when the river overflows, and nourish natural grasslands that are grazed by livestock when waters recede. In addition, a great variety of wetland-adapted flora and fauna — including edible fish and medicinal plants — live in the interdependent, biodiverse ecosystem they constitute.

In an attempt to make this issue a matter of state for the Argentine provinces and the countries that form part of the basin of the Paraná River and that of its crucial tributary, the Paraguay River, the Santa Fe-based NGO Fundación Proteger-Amigos de la Tierra organized the seminar on management in Paraná September 25 and 26, and a seminar on tourism in these environments on September 27, with the sponsorship of Wetlands International and the Ramsar Convention.

The objective is to set up a 3 million-hectare "corridor" of protected wetlands along the 3,400 km of the courses of the Paraguay and Paraná rivers that are still free of dams and can be developed in environment- and people-friendly ways that will improve the lives and incomes of local communities. The floodplains extending from the Pantanal in the Mato Grosso to the River Plate would comprise the longest such unbroken ecosystem in the world.

More than 700 government officials, NGOs, students and professionals from 16 countries attended the two-day seminar on management, and the following one-day seminar on tourism at which panelists said that eco-tourism and cultural tourism initiatives like fishing, boat excursions, birding, and organic and other value-added farming ventures could be good income sources for residents of wetland areas.

Tourism authorities from the Argentine northeastern river provinces signed a document stating the need to coordinate efforts to set up the corridor and involve neighbouring countries in the process.

During the closing ceremony of the management seminar, Entre Ríos Governor Sergio Montiel announced two decrees: one declared the province's interest in asking the national government (through the Environment Secretariat and Foreign Ministry) to request that its wetlands become Ramsar sites, and the other banned cutting the few remaining native forests on public and private land.

The provincial officials also requested the national tourism and environment secretariats to declare 2004 National Wetlands Year, and the Tourism Secretariat to declare the wetlands corridor proposal project of national tourism interest and call for a first national seminar on tourism in wetlands.

In addition, they asked the World Tourism Organization and the Ramsar Convention to declare 2005 International Wetlands Tourism Year.

Thus, the issue has been installed as a talking point.