

## Charles Brewer-Carías – Explorer Extraordinaire of “The Lost World”

"My hero is Man, the Discoverer. The world we now view from the literate West – the vistas of time, the land and the seas, the heavenly bodies and our own bodies, the plants and animals, history and human societies past and present – had to be opened by countless Columbuses."

– Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers*

Some heroes of exploration of the natural world from the annals of recorded history are well-known names, their discoveries legendary: Roy Chapman Andrews in Asia, David Livingstone in Africa, and Alexander von Humboldt in South America, to name but a few. In my view, history will judge that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, there existed an explorer whose name surely belongs alongside the most important explorers and discoverers of all time. Readers of *Desnudo en la Selva* will realize why I believe the book's author is that person.

I met Charles Brewer-Carías three decades ago, when as a young Associate Curator at The New York Botanical Garden I was invited to participate on an expedition that Charles had organized to Cerro de la Neblina, a remote wilderness area in southern Venezuela on the border with Brazil, and the tallest mountain in the Guayana Highland region, known to readers familiar with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's writings as *The Lost World*. Once the expedition was underway, I quickly realized I was part of an extraordinary scientific venture. I was only involved with two expeditions, but the overall exploration of the Neblina area took place over four years, 1983-1987. I believe this was arguably the most notable single expeditionary collecting effort to one place in the history of the natural sciences. Considering the participation of 145 investigators, representing 24 scientific and academic organizations from 6 countries, encompassing 10 scientific disciplines, the human and institutional resources brought to bear on the effort were unparalleled. Considering the tens of thousands of specimens, thousands of photographs, and hundreds of notebooks of data collected under physically challenging circumstances, resulting in hundreds of species described as new to science to date, the output of natural sciences documentation that occurred was unprecedented and has never since been surpassed.

If his leadership of the spectacularly successful multidisciplinary expeditions to Cerro de la Neblina were Charles' only exploration accomplishment, he would have earned an honored place in the history of scientific exploration. But over the past fifty years *he has led more than 200 expeditions to The Lost World* on which more than 250 specialists in diverse scientific disciplines have accompanied him. While Charles is not a zoologist, botanist, geologist, geographer, speleologist, or anthropologist, he has made important discoveries in all these fields. He has published the results of his discoveries in numerous articles in distinguished scientific journals, such as the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, *Economic Botany*, and the *Memoirs of The New York Botanical Garden*. He has authored twelve books on topics ranging from the geography to the vegetation of the Guayana Highland, and on his discovery of the largest

sinkholes on earth and the discovery of the largest and longest quartzite cave in the world at the summit of a flat-topped tepuy.

Charles' tremendous physical stamina and prodigious linguistic prowess have doubtless combined to make him a success as an international expedition leader and discoverer. He speaks seven languages, including the Ye'kwana, an indigenous language of Carib stock. These physical and mental traits have also well-positioned him over the decades to live with and learn from indigenous peoples of the forested wilderness of southern Venezuela. What he has learned from forest peoples about survival and subsistence, combined with his own research and experimentation with indigenous technologies, have provided the material and contextual bases for the present book.

While this volume may well be Charles Brewer-Carías' magnum opus, it is certainly not his final book, as I know of at least one he and I plan to publish on what we discovered during an ethnobotanical expedition that Charles led in 1991 to investigate the use of plants by the Yanomamö; and, of course, it too will be illustrated with Charles' outstanding photography. Nor, despite after five decades of exploring, are expeditions all in Charles' past, as it is just in his nature to explore and to make discoveries in the natural world. Hundreds of species of plants and animals new to science have been discovered on expeditions he has led, including 28 species named in his honor by biologists. Surely there are many, many more species yet to be discovered in the Guayana Highland, and just as surely will Charles Brewer-Carías be charting the course as one of The Lost World's most prolific, productive, and passionate "Columbuses."

-- Brian M. Boom, Ph.D., FLS, Director, Caribbean Biodiversity Program, and Bassett Maguire Curator of Botany, The New York Botanical Garden (October 2013, New York City)