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FOR BREAKING NEWS, 24 HOURS

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SOME PRICEY, BRAIN-BOOSTING GADGETS MAY BE LESS EDUCATIONAL THAN OLDER, SIMPLER TOYS



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SHAQLESS HEAT SHACKLED

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POWER OUTAGES CAUSED MANY IMMIGRATION LAWYERS TO MISS FILING DEADLINES

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WHITE PARTY HAS THE BLUES

THANKS TO WILMA, MANY RESTAURANTS WILL MISS THIS YEAR'S HIGH-PROFILE CHARITY GALA

SPORTS, 1D

NORTHWESTERN IN SEMIFINALS

NORTHWESTERN GOING TO CLASS 6A STATE SEMIFINALS AFTER 28-18 WIN OVER SOUTH DADE

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SUNNY AND BREEZY
TODAY'S HIGH 81 | LOW 65

• Bryan Norcross' forecast, back of Section B
• Online: weather.herald.com

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AFTER-THANKSGIVING SALES



TIM CHAPMAN/HERALD STAFF

DOORS OPEN: Shoppers rush through the entrance at the Wal-Mart in West Kendall at 5 a.m. Friday. Police had tried to keep people from cutting in line, but to no avail.

CHARGE (IT)!

■ Bargain prices on electronics drew South Florida shoppers out in force to kick off the holiday shopping season.

BY ELAINE WALKER, NIALA BOODHOO AND HANNAH SAMPSON
ewalker@herald.com

Tom Liu had just finished his Thanksgiving meal when he got in line at the Best Buy in Aventura. He wanted to snag the \$379.99 Toshiba laptop computer and the \$149.98 eMachines computer system.

His nine-hour wait paid off: three laptops, two computer systems and three televisions. Throw in some video games and other small items and the total tab was close to \$2,500.

"I'm pretty much broke right now," said Liu, of Miami. "It was a long night. But we got almost everything we wanted."

Carlos Cabarcas wasn't so lucky. First in line at the Wal-Mart on Kendall

• TURN TO SHOPPING, 24A



J. ALBERT DIAZ/HERALD STAFF

FULL LOAD: Sherry Rucker tries to fit more purchases into her SUV after shopping at the Sawgrass Mills Wal-Mart.

! **HERALD.COM:** TO SEE VIDEO OF THE SHOPPING CHAOS IN SOUTH FLORIDA, CLICK ON TODAY'S EXTRAS

UTILITIES

Blackout clues may lie in 'graveyard'

■ Studies to determine what caused power and telephone poles to fail during Hurricane Wilma have fueled tension between Florida Power & Light and BellSouth.

BY JOHN DORSCHNER
jdorschner@herald.com

In the remote pastureland northeast of Lake Okeechobee, four miles down a narrow two-lane road off State Road 70, is a dump that has become the pole graveyard.

It's the final resting place for up to 10,000 Florida Power & Light poles that cracked during Hurricane Wilma — a major cause for the darkness that descended on 3.2 million homes and businesses.

But before the wood shafts are

buried, many are being studied, prodded and poked as seriously as if they were crime victims undergoing autopsies.

FPL and BellSouth are each doing studies. The Public Service Commission is also taking a look. Preliminary results have sparked a growing argument about who bears — or shares

• TURN TO STUDY, 27A

CHINA

China forced to come clean on spill



GREG BAKER/AP

CITY SHUTS TAPS: A woman gets water Friday from a tap at Harbin Brewery, owned by Anheuser-Busch, which has its own wells.

■ After initially lying about a poisonous river spill, China has again seen its credibility stained.

BY TIM JOHNSON
Knight Ridder News Service

BEIJING — When a chemical plant leaked poison into a river in northeastern China, sparking a calamity this week, regional officials employed a time-tested strategy to quash the bad news: They lied.

First, they denied that the chemical plant along the Songhua River had leaked anything other than water and carbon dioxide.

When a 50-mile slick of cancer-causing benzene approached Harbin, the largest city in China's northeast, threatening its drinking water, officials shut down the water system. They told the city's 3.8 million residents — comparable to Los Angeles' 2004 population — that the four-day water cutoff was for maintenance.

• TURN TO CHINA, 16A

HERALD WATCHDOG

Feds probing SunCruz links to GOP

■ Federal investigators are scrutinizing a \$10,000 donation made five years ago by SunCruz Casinos to a Republican campaign committee on behalf of an Ohio congressman.

BY JAY WEAVER
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When U.S. Rep. Bob Ney assailed the owner of SunCruz Casinos in 2000, it seemed puzzling that an Ohio lawmaker would go out of his way to attack a South Florida businessman who was trying to sell his floating gaming empire.

It turns out, according to federal investigators, Ney publicly called SunCruz founder Konstantinos "Gus" Boullis a "bad apple" in exchange for the company's new owners contributing \$10,000 — in his name — to a national campaign fund to help elect Republicans to Congress.

The latest disclosure is another South Florida link in a long-running Washington scandal that revolves around the influence-peddling of powerful lobbyists who collected tens of millions of dollars from their clients and also led investors to buy Dania Beach-based SunCruz Casinos.

Law enforcement sources say that just weeks after the controversial sale to Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff and his business partner Adam Kidan in September 2000, the two men took \$10,000 from their gambling business and donated the money to the National Republican Congressional Committee on Ney's behalf.

Ney, who has not been charged but has received a federal subpoena from

• TURN TO PROBE, 28A

COLOMBIA

Coca growing, eradication both threaten national parks

■ Colombians struggled to save their national parks from both sides of the cocaine war, which rely on toxic chemicals that pollute the environment.

BY STEVEN DUDLEY
sdudley@herald.com

SAN FRANCISCO, Colombia — Arturo Avi is a typical small farmer in Colombia in many respects: He's a short, sun-tanned man who barely ekes out a living by growing corn, yuca, rice, raspberries — and coca, the raw material for cocaine.

Like the others, he worries about the government's massive campaign to spray herbicides on coca farms. But he's got an advantage: His plot lies inside a national park, where the aerial spraying has been prohibited for years.

"I'm a little scared of fumigation. Everyone is scared of fumigation. . . . But I know this is a national park," said the diminutive 53-year-old peasant and father of three children.

Avi is not alone. Thousands of farmers are clearing forests in parks to make way for coca farms, and using strong chemicals to grow and process the coca into cocaine. Colombian government officials say the chemicals are destroying the parks. But environmentalists say the herbicide used to kill coca plants would do even worse damage.

It's the same story throughout Latin America, home to some of the most beautiful and beautiful national pre-

• TURN TO PARKS, 2A

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COLOMBIA



CARLOS VILLALON PHOTOS
/FOR THE HERALD

PROTECTING PARKLANDS: Above, a Colombian police gunner watches over Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta during a flight over the national park. Right, coca fields are pointed out; they have spread in national parks, which are protected by law from aerial fumigations.



National parks are threatened by coca growing, eradication

• PARKS, FROM 1A

serves on the planet: the Galápagos in Ecuador, Costa Rica's rainforest and Venezuela's Avila park, to name just a few. They are major tourist attractions, and places like Costa Rica and Ecuador depend on them to survive.

Yet their governments are often too corrupt, poor, or inept to administer the parks. In Ecuador, the Galápagos Islands are plagued by political instability on the mainland. In Venezuela, the government is seeking to build housing for the poor in the protected Avila forest that overlooks Caracas.

And in Colombia's parks, the problems revolve around illegal crops like coca and opium poppy, from which heroin is made, and the leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary fighters who operate out of remote jungles, forests and mountains.

In the past five years, the parks have become a virtual safe haven for the illegal crops and armed groups, with the National Police estimating that there are now 27,000 acres of coca in 22 of the nation's 51 parks, up from 6,500 acres in 2000.

Avi lives on the edge of the mountainous Munchique Park in southern Cauca province, which has some small coca and poppy farms and is largely controlled by leftist rebels. Other parks, such as the 1.6 million-acre Sierra de la Macarena, a massive and rugged mountain formation in the eastern plains that is also largely controlled by leftist rebels, has an estimated 1,500 acres of coca.

A 950,000-acre area along the northern coast known as the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which is mostly controlled by right-wing paramilitary groups, has some 900 acres, according to police estimates.

'FRUSTRATED'

"We feel frustrated because we see the drug traffickers getting stronger and we can't do anything," said Col. Henry Gamboa, head of National Police's anti-narcotics aerial spraying branch.

Colombia receives upwards of \$700 million per year in U.S. aid to fight drug trafficking. But coca acreage in the parks neatly dodges the war on drugs and makes for a peculiar dilemma: spray herbicide in the parks and risk damaging the ecosystem, or spare the parks and give a free ride to coca and poppy growers who over the long term may do even more damage with their use of pollutant chemicals.

Processing coca leaves into coca base and later cocaine requires a witches' brew of chemicals, from hydrochloric acid to paint thinner, often dumped into the nearest stream at the end of the day.

On a helicopter flight over the Santa Marta national park organized by the National Police earlier this year, journalists could see small plots of coca perched on nearly vertical hillsides inside the park's boundary.

The mountains spill down into the Caribbean, making for a short journey to the port

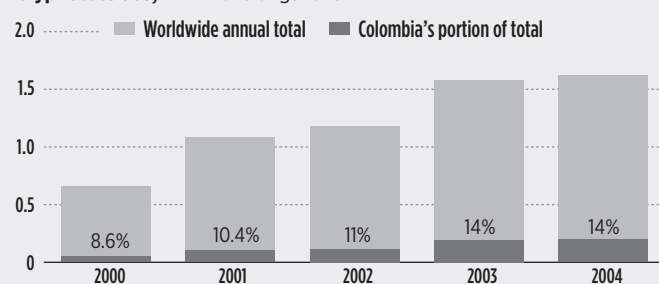
NATIONAL PARKS AT RISK

Colombia has 51 national parks and preserves. For more information on them go to www.parquesnacionales.gov.co



U.S. and Colombian authorities who argue in favor of spraying coca farms in national parks say the herbicide glyphosate is widely used throughout the world.

Glyphosate use, in millions of gallons



These are a few of the substances used to process coca leaves into coca base, and later cocaine, that often slip into the environment:

- Ammonium sulfate
- Gasoline
- Fuel oil
- Cement
- Paint thinner
- Hydrochloric acid
- Nitric acid

S. RIEPE / HERALD STAFF

SMART BOX

THE STORY SO FAR

- **For many years**, the Colombian government has refused to use air-sprayed herbicides against coca and opium poppy farms in the country's national parks because of fears that the chemical would cause irreparable damage to the ecosystems there.
- **What now:** More and more coca and poppy growers are moving into the parks, knowing they will be safe there. National Police estimate there are now 27,000 acres of coca in 22 of the nation's 51 parks, up from 6,500 acres in 2000.
- **What's next:** Colombia's government recently shifted the guidelines ever so slightly to permit spraying in the parks, but only under very strict guidelines and after a thorough review of each case. No parks have been sprayed yet. The government also has declared that it will give priority to efforts to manually eradicate the coca in parks — a policy that would erase the need for herbicides but increase the danger of guerrilla and paramilitary attacks on government troops who must protect the process. For more information on Colombia's national parks go to www.parquesnacionales.gov.co/

PARKS SERIES

This is the first part of an occasional series of stories on the slow destruction of national parks around Latin America. **This story will focus** on how the parks in Colombia are caught in a destructive vise growing out of the war on drugs. Coca and opium poppy farmers are damaging the parks — cutting down forests to grow the crops, then polluting rivers with the chemicals used to process coca leaves into coca base. But there's fear that the herbicide sprayed on the fields by a U.S.-financed program may do even worse damage to the parks. Later stories will focus on the troubles facing the national parks in Venezuela and Ecuador.

from which the drugs are shipped to the United States and Europe. And they provide much of the region's drinking water, which often becomes contaminated by runoff from the drug-processing centers.

"Clearly there has to be a balance between preserving the environment, encouraging alternative development and not letting the drug traffickers get the upper hand," said David Murray, a policy analyst at the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy. "It's a delicate balance."

Others are more blunt in their assessment, saying the problem lies with the coca and poppy growers and processors.

TRAFFICKERS BLAMED

"The drug traffickers are destroying the parks," Gamboa said. "They're deforesting. They're creating erosion with slash-and-burn techniques. They're contaminating the parks with chemicals."

Colombian police and U.S. government officials are using these arguments to try to pressure President Alvaro Uribe's strongly pro-fumigation government to allow the aerial spraying of herbicides in the parks.

They insist that several studies have shown the herbicide glyphosate, sold in the United States as Roundup, is

safe. Others continue to claim that spread over a wide area and mixed with other chemicals so that it sticks to the leaves, as it is used in Colombia, it causes incalculable damages.

National Park Service officials, for instance, are opposed to spraying.

They say there are only 9,000 acres of coca on parklands, not the 27,000 acres the police claim. And many believe it would be better to attack the social problems underlying the drug problem, such as the poverty that drives farmers to plant coca and poppies instead of the less profitable food and other crops.

"We think that the huge part of the problem is prevention, rather than attacking the situation after the problem starts," said National Park Service Director Julia Miranda.

"[But] our job is not to define the anti-narcotics law. We're not part of the decision-making process of fumigation," she added diplomatically.

In August, the Colombian government shifted the guidelines ever so slightly to permit spraying in the parks, but only under very strict guidelines and after a thorough review of each case. No parks have been sprayed yet.

Uribe's government also has declared that it will give priority to efforts to eradicate manually the coca in parks — a policy that would erase the need for herbicides but increase the danger.

This year, armed groups have killed three policemen and injured eight others and an army soldier who were protecting farmers as they uprooted their coca.

Both guerrilla and paramilitary units earn large parts of their income by extorting payments from coca and poppy growers and processors, and often traffic the drugs themselves.

REPLACING COCA

For his part, Arturo Avi says he is replacing his coca with raspberries and got a government grant to start a fish farm. Others have been offered government grants to switch to legal products or work to protect the parks.

But even Avi acknowledges that the government often has failed to pay out the grants and other types of aid tendered in past eradication campaigns.

"It's very difficult to say 'Don't plant coca,'" Avi said, "Because the government never comes through on their promises."

Special correspondent Jenny Carolina González contributed to this report.