



Fact-checking Voltalia's Claims About Its Canudos Wind Energy Project

On September 2, 2021, American Bird Conservancy (ABC) partner group LPO received a letter from French energy company Voltalia (see the letter in [English](#) and [French](#)), ostensible to allay concerns about impacts of the company's planned wind energy project on the Endangered Lear's Macaw in Brazil ("Canudos"). Unfortunately, Voltalia's response is in many ways inaccurate and misleading. Here, ABC sets the record straight.

Voltalia's Claim: Voltalia states that it is "proud to be recognized both by the public authorities and by the local populations as an actor aware of local issues and determined to provide solutions to socio-environmental issues."

Facts: If Voltalia is truly seen as an actor "determined to provide solutions to socio-environmental issues," why then do we have a letter signed by 70 local groups asking that the project be stopped? (See the letter in Portuguese and English [here](#).)

In their letter, the community members state that none of the following legal requirements were fulfilled by the company or the regional authorities: Environmental Impact Study; disclosure of the Environmental Impact Report; and hearings, public consultations, and prior, free and informed consultation.

The communities state that this "implies a serious violation of the rights of populations directly and indirectly affected and to the caatinga biome. It is now possible to verify impacts such as: deforestation, including protected species such as licuri (food of the Macaws), the increase in the price of land, land grabbing, the violation of rights of coming and going from communities and the chasing away of wild animals. Voltalia S/A has been trying to justify these and other serious social and environmental violations with the employment generation argument, but the documents presented by the company itself inform that, after completion of the works, there will only be 15 jobs for the operation of the wind farm."

Further calling Voltalia's claim into question, the [company was mentioned in a notice by the Public Ministry of Bahia](#) that cited the project's "potential for irreversible impacts to the region's fauna and communities." The Public Ministry called for suspension or cancellation of the project's approval until legal requirements have been met.

Voltalia’s Claim: The wind energy project in Canudos was “designed from its initial phase as an opportunity to better understand and protect the populations of Lear's Aras [sic].”

Facts: It’s absurd for Voltalia to claim that its purpose in developing this project was “to better understand and protect” the Lear’s Macaw. If this were the case, then the company would have been willing to hear from other experts in the region, including Brazilian conservation group Fundação Biodiversitas, whose concerns were summarily dismissed by the company. American Bird Conservancy received similar responses from Voltalia.

Conservation groups World Wildlife Fund-Brazil and BirdLife International are among the other [expert organizations who have asked for Voltalia to cancel or move this project](#). Had the welfare of the macaw been the catalyst, it would not be built in its habitat, at a site recognized as both an Alliance for Zero Extinction site and a Key Biodiversity Area.

This claim is further refuted by the fact that a critically important tracking study of the Lear’s Macaw that was to be implemented by Voltalia’s consultant was postponed due to COVID-19, then never reinitiated. Voltalia proceeded to clear the site, regardless of this lack of data.

Voltalia’s Claim: Voltalia states that “since 2019, we have been working in close partnership with Qualis Consulting, represented by Erika Pacifico, world expert in Lear's Macaws.”

Facts: Erica Pacifico is an expert on the Lear’s Macaw, and ABC staff have spoken with her several times during our engagement on this project. We do not dispute that she is an expert on the bird, but she is not an expert on wind energy, its impacts on birds, or how to minimize these impacts. As you have seen, many international organizations who do have this expertise—including BirdLife International – have signed the ABC-led partner letter asking that the project not proceed in this location due to its likely impact on this species.

It is also important to note that Dr. Pacifico is on the payroll of Voltalia, which indicates a possible conflict of interest on her part.

Voltalia’s Claim: “Several studies have shown the low presence of Lear's Macaw in the area of influence of the park, which is about 40 km (25 miles) from the main dormitory.”

Facts: This is incorrect. It is actually 26 km (16 miles) from the main breeding site – a distance a macaw can cover in under 30 minutes – but many other areas used by macaws are much closer to the turbines.

A fundamental flaw with Voltalia’s project is that it is based on far too little data about the birds. Voltalia was supposed to conduct a study to evaluate how many macaws used the project area, but it was postponed due to COVID-19, and the company has since moved ahead with construction without this data. They have no idea how many birds will be lost in the entire process.

Meanwhile, we do know that only 2,000 of these Endangered birds exist, and that each loss represents a setback to the species’ recovery. We also know that **dozens of Lear’s Macaws do use the area close to the proposed turbine site**. The global bird sighting website eBird shows that there have been many macaw sightings close to the area slated for development of the turbines. For example, a group of 21 Lear’s Macaws was seen within six miles (9.65 km) of the turbines, 78 birds within 9 miles (14.5 km), as well as reports even closer to the proposed array.

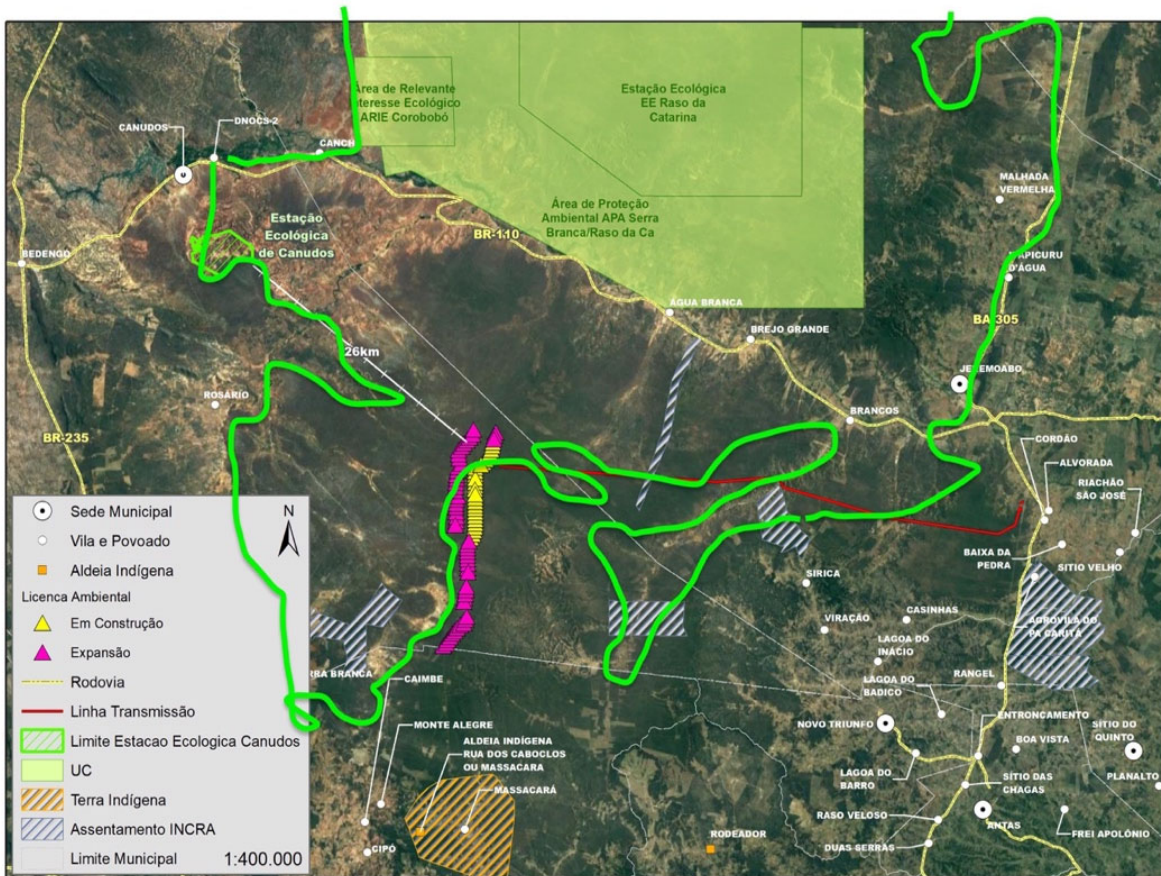
Birders who visit this area see Lear’s Macaws all over the area. **Please see the eBird map below**. The Lear’s Macaw sightings by birders indicated here describe a triangle along roads. The turbine array would be built inside this triangle to the south in an area seldom visited by birders but still with many reports of macaws.



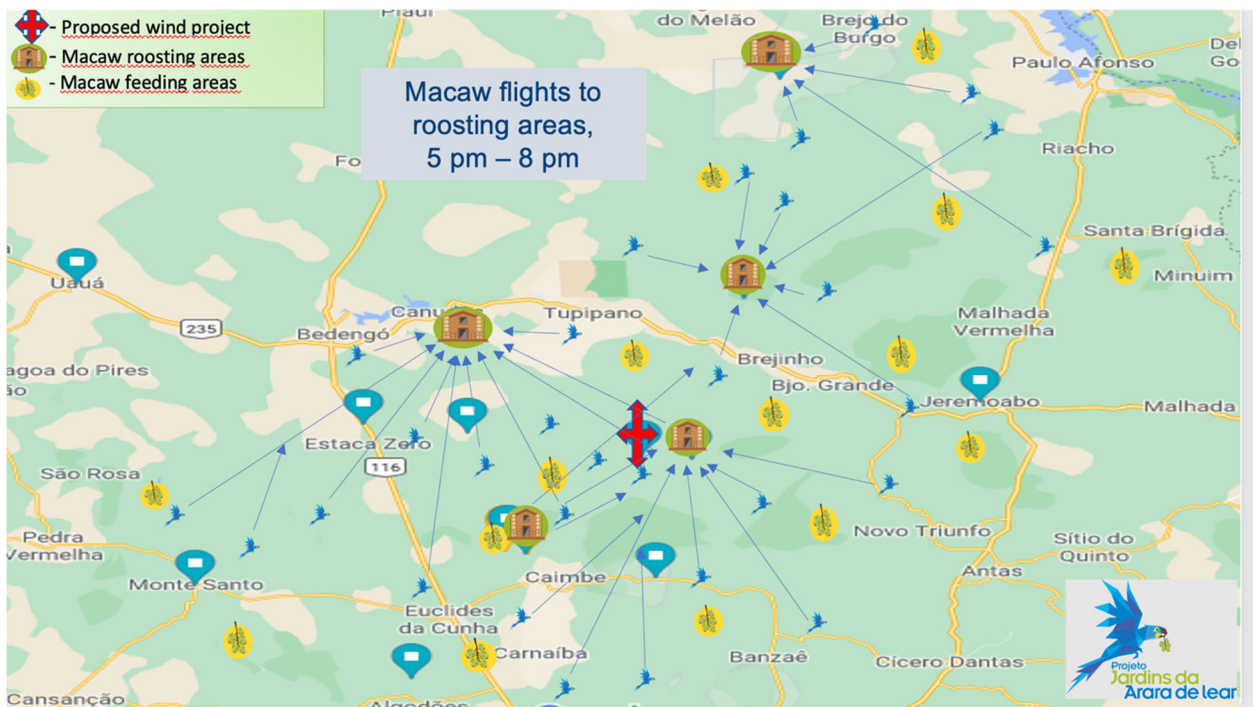
Local biologists have also produced maps that show how the macaws regularly traverse the turbine area to move between roosting and feeding sites. These maps are included below.

It should also be noted that the turbines are proposed within the boundary of an AZE site which Voltalia – as part of its commitment to follow International Finance Corporation environmental standards – should be avoiding. The company does not appear to have realized this fact, easily obtainable by reasonable due diligence; for example, by using IBAT.

Following is a map of the project site provided by Voltalia. ABC added a green line to show the borders of the AZE site. This map shows that it is 26 km (16 miles) from the Canudos Biological Station (the macaw's main roosting site) to the proposed wind project – not 40 km as stated by the company. A macaw can – and does – easily fly that distance in 30 minutes.



Local conservation group, Projeto Jardins da Arara de Lear, put together useful maps showing the different nesting sites and movements of the Lear's Macaw in the region. **The roosting area closest to the project site, Barreiras, is a mere 6 km from the closest proposed turbine. Barreiras has had up to 18 roosting macaws.** These maps are shown below.



In sum, these maps show that Lear's Macaws do in fact frequently use the area of the proposed wind project, including the area of the proposed wind project, for roosting and feeding.

Voltalia's Claim: Voltalia claims that it is planning to use an automatic bird detection system to stop the turbines when macaws approach.

Facts: Voltalia may be planning to use an automatic bird detection system, but it is unlikely that such a system will be effective in preventing collisions by Lear's Macaws. That is because the technology has not yet been adapted for use with species such as parrots; instead, the technology has been developed for use with large raptors such as Golden Eagles (see [here](#)) and similar species (see [here](#)).

Voltalia has also previously suggested that they will paint one blade on each turbine black to make the turbines more visible to macaws. This method has only been tested at one facility, in Norway, focused on eagles, and with a tiny sample size. There is no reason to believe that this will work in Brazil, with macaws (more [here](#)). The plans disregard the fact that Lear's Macaws also fly in low light, when the turbines will be less visible.

It should also be noted that curtailing, or stopping turbines from spinning, is not instantaneous. It takes some time for the turbine to slow down, even when shut off. For this reason, the success of the system depends completely on whether the bird is detected soon enough and whether it is making a direct flight or soaring. Compared to raptors, tight flocks of relatively smaller, fast- and direct-flying macaws would be difficult to detect in time to curtail turbines.

Furthermore, recent science shows that birds collide with turbines regardless of whether the blades are spinning (see [here](#)). This means the macaws would be at risk of collisions with the blades and associated infrastructure even if the turbine blades were stopped.

These facts demonstrate that Voltalia and Dr. Pacifico lack the necessary expertise to evaluate the risk of this project to Lear's Macaws. They also highlight why it's dangerous and irresponsible to proceed with this project, particularly without the necessary data or analysis that should have been provided prior to the project's launch.

Voltalia's Claim: Voltalia claims that it has invested money in protecting and expanding the birds' territories.

Facts: This gets back to the fundamental flaw with this project – how do you mitigate for bird mortality when you have no idea how many birds will be killed? It is unacceptable to consider Lear's Macaw deaths as an acceptable side effect of an energy project. The species already faces too many threats, and its population numbers are too low to knowingly and willingly decide to allow further losses.

One other very important point: This is one of many wind facilities that are being considered in the vicinity of the Lear's Macaw's range. This project would set a precedent that it's acceptable to lose Lear's Macaws as long as there is mention of mitigation. The cumulative impact, if this

and other projects move forward, could reverse the gains made in Lear's Macaw populations over the past few decades.

In short, it's impossible to effectively mitigate if the likely impacts are unknown, and the loss of even a small number of Lear's Macaws is too much to allow.

We note that we did not see the mitigation measures Voltalia mentioned included as a condition of approval for their permit, which was issued (albeit illegally) by regional authorities without an Environmental Impact Assessment and other legal requirements.