Prologe

Dr. Fred G. Thompson
Florida Museum of Natural History
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida, USA 36611

A century or more has passed since the great monographers of the nineteenth Century first attempted to summarize the molluscan fauna of Latin American. The monumental studies by H. Crosse, P. Fischer, E. von Martens, A. D' Orbigny, L. A. Reeve, L. Pfeiffer , G. B. Sowerby and H. Strebel provided a foundation for understanding the neotropical fauna. Even as their treatises were printed the authors recognized that they offered only a partial glimpse into the magnificent diversity that is found in the Latin American realm. Subsequently, many authors have contributed an extensive literature on the fauna, a literature that fills many library shelves. Even so, only recently have we begun to understand the extent of the molluscan diversity that actually occurs in Latin America.

The topic of this compendium is the molluscan fauna found in all of the region that lies south of the United States of America border. It consists of countries of Hispanic culture as well as countries of Portuguese, French, Dutch and English extractions. The physical diversity of the region is even greater than its cultural diversity. Most of this region lies in the Neotropical realm, but it also extends south to the sub-Antarctic tip of South America. The region contains rainforests and deserts, plains and mountains, innumerable rivers and lakes, continents and island archipelagoes, and seemingly endless marine environments. It consists of large areas newly emerged from the sea as well as larger areas that have been above sea level since the Precambrian. It includes areas of active volcanism as well as areas that have not had a significant tectonic event for over a billion years.

Current knowledge of the Latin American molluscan fauna is about equivalent to the level of knowledge of the vertebrates a century ago. The molluscan fauna is vast! As is pointed out by Ramirez, *et al*, Peru has a known land snail fauna of 763 species. Yet, the fauna is poorly known! A look at a map shows that most of the known species come from just a few small areas of the country. Peru consists of a myriad of canyons, valleys, ridges, mountain chains and plains, each of which has its own local climate and its own ecology. Most physiographic regions of the country have not been explored for mollusks, so that in many respects the study of the fauna has just begun. The dilemma is not unique to Peru, nor is it special to land mollusks. We know very little about the Latin American freshwater or marine faunas compared to other areas of the world.

Numerous obstacles have hindered the development of malacology as a discipline in Latin American. Foremost of these obstacles are the vastness of the region and the inherent difficulty of access to most areas until recently. Certainly, the inaccessibility of most areas has hindered all fields of biology. It is only recently that the disciplines of ichthyology and herpetology have approached a reasonable summary of the fish and amphibian faunas. In contrast the long and ardu-

ous task of documenting the molluscan fauna is in its infancy. The disparity of knowledge between vertebrate zoology and invertebrate zoology will continue for a long time. Recent trends in the emphasis of invertebrate organisms in biotic surveys promises to reduce this disparity.

A comprehensive review of the malacology of Latin America is a monumental task that will require the combined efforts of numerous authors over many years. The following volume constitutes a giant step toward this goal. No pretense is made concerning the extent of coverage that is given to any single country or to any single subject. Each contributor presents a concise summary within the inherently difficult obstacles that pervades the subject of malacology. This volume marks the beginning of a long and difficult task.