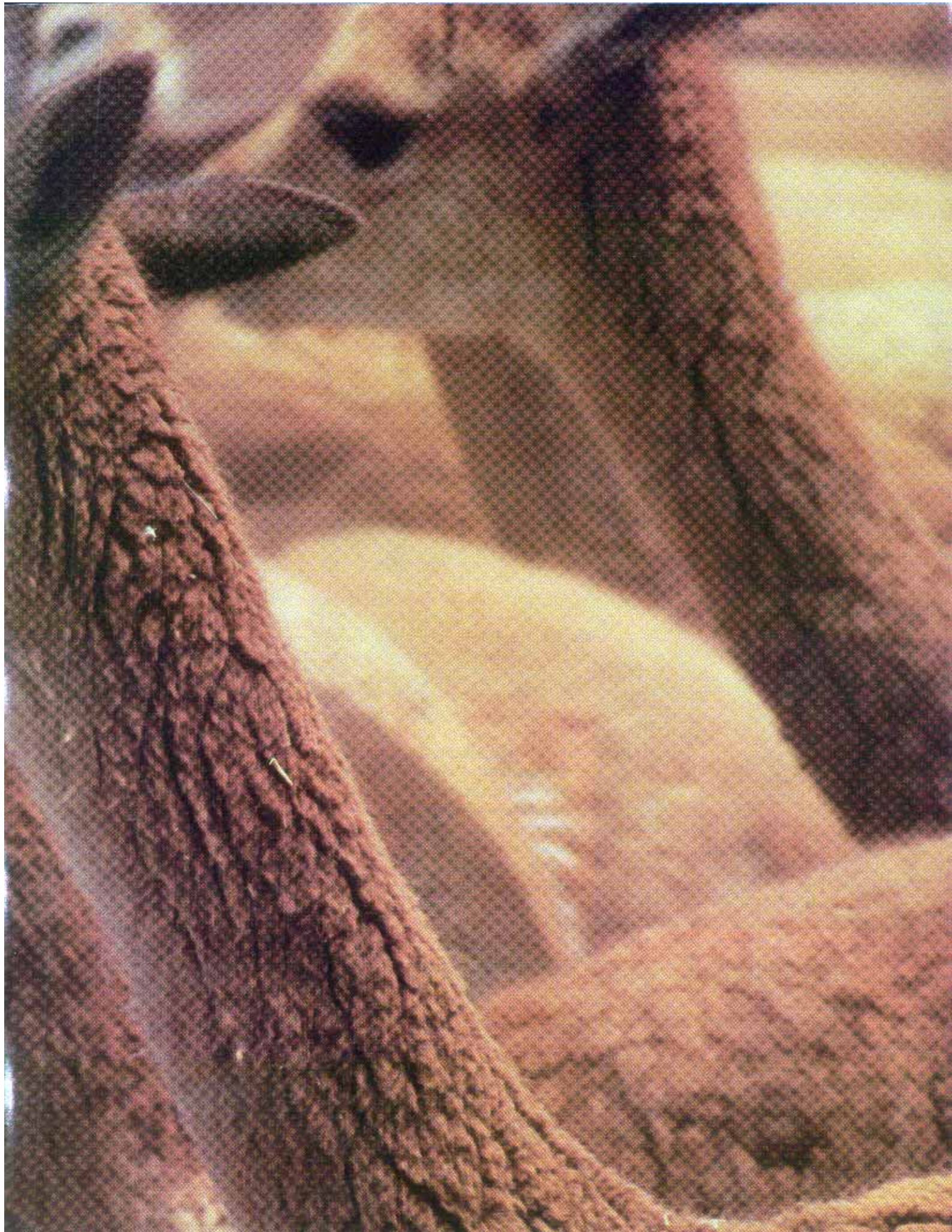




Vicuña
fleece
is the
rarest,
softest
fiber
in the
world

PROTECTING
THE
GOLDEN
FLEECE

By Eric Hoffman





valley and running roughly parallel, a mile-long rope is held by some 800 villagers. The fence and snake-line of humanity create an immense funnel, channeling the animals into a passage that leads to a ten-acre holding pen.

As vicuñas rush by, villagers wave their arms and hats, singing and shouting: "Las vicuñas corren como el viento (Vicuñas run like the wind)." Sandra Revilla, a young university student from Arequipa, has made a two-day bus trip to be part of the chaccu. In English, she explains to our small contingent of North Americans, "It's like going back in time to be here. The pride of ancient Peru combines with that of modern Peru in the vicuña." Ruffino Quilla, a veterinarian and alpaca farmer from Juliaca, adds, "This program is good for Peru. It will conserve vicuñas for future generations."

Because of their valuable fleece, vicuñas were in danger of extinction

from heavy poaching for much of this century. In the 1960s, Peruvian diplomat Felipe Benavides began a one-man campaign against illegal commerce in vicuña cloth. Benavides broke windows in prestigious shops in London to call attention to the origins of the garments. He enlisted his friend, Prince Philip, in the cause, and eventually the Pampa Galeras reserve was created as a refuge for one of the last remaining large populations of vicuñas in the Andes.

But by the 1970s, poachers in pursuit of the fleece had killed whole family groups of vicuñas, and fewer than 8,000 vicuñas remained in all of the Andes. With extinction a real possibility the International Union for Conservation of Nature, in 1975, assigned the vicuña to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). This action led to international laws forbidding trade in vicuñas and their byproducts.

In addition, anti-poaching efforts in Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia paved the way for a comeback as dramatic as that of any endangered hoofed species in the world. Moreover, it succeeded in an impoverished region, where a typical villager is often hardpressed to put a meal on the table for his family, let alone worry about supporting a conservation program for local wildlife.

By 1993, with the Peruvian vicuña head count at more than 120,000 animals—and healthy populations of some 30,000 vicuñas in Argentina, 16,000 in Chile, perhaps 25,000 in Bolivia, as well as a small transplanted herd in Ecuador—the animal had grown fairly common throughout much of its historic range. Highland villagers in Peru no longer believed that vicuñas needed protection. A new strategy was necessary. The Peruvian government, in a bold move, revived the chaccu, embracing the past to combat the future.



Vicuña fleece is among the finest in the world, prized by luxury fiber processors in South America, Europe, and Asia. The challenge is managing this cash crop without playing into the hands of commercial poachers. Today the vicuña's status has been relaxed to Appendix II in Peru and parts of Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia, permitting limited international trade of vicuña products. Now, vicuña policymakers must allow commercial harvesting in a way that shares the economic pie with villagers while discouraging poaching.

In Peru, Alfonso Martinez, President of Consejo Nacional de Camelidos Sud American (CONACS), recommends management policies for alpacas, llamas, guanacos, and vicuñas—the South American camelids. Martinez grew up in a village near Pampa Galeras

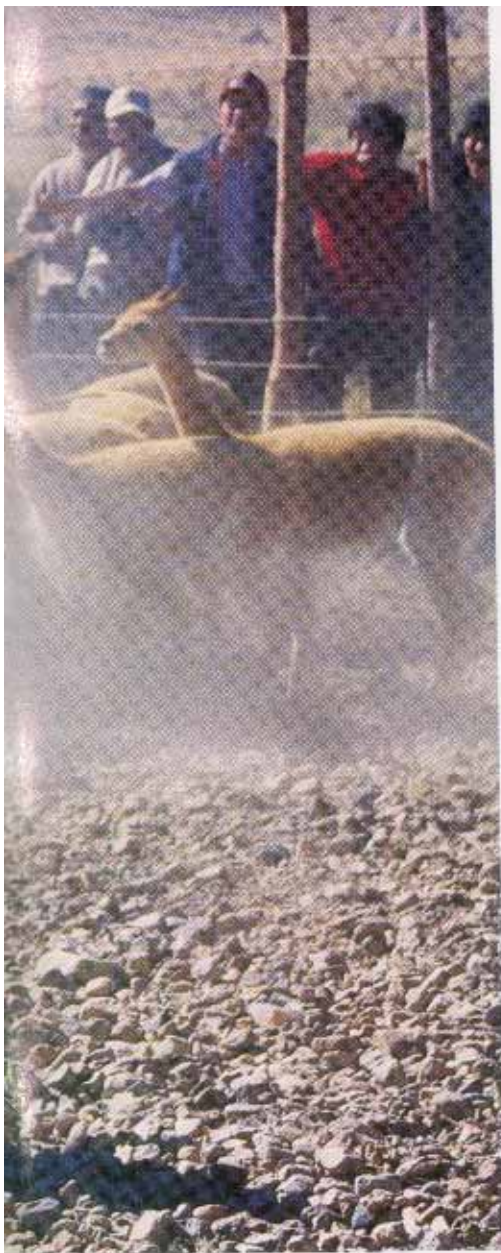
before attending San Marcos Law School, and knows firsthand the harsh realities of living in rural Peru. He became convinced that reviving the chaccu offered the best chance to involve rural communities in the animal's management and protection. "People have a financial incentive to protect vicuñas for their valuable fleece, which is shorn every two years," he explains.

Martinez organized one of the first modern chaccus in 1993 and invited Peru's President, Alberto Fujimori, to watch it. President Fujimori returned to Lima a convert. By 1998, there were 180 chaccus being held throughout the country. Martinez organized legislation that permitted fiber collected by villagers to be purchased in a government-run auction that attracted large fiber mills and fashion houses from around

the world. The auction was structured so that the villagers received the lion's share of the \$250-per-pound price tag.

The United States government's refusal to remove the vicuña from the U.S. Endangered Species List has drawn criticism from Martinez. He believes it undermines his country's conservation program, which relies on local involvement and marketing success. "The U.S. should be the most important consumer for our vicuña fleece," he complains.

Relief may be in sight, however. Kurt Johnson, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, reports that they are developing a proposal to reclassify certain vicuña populations from endangered to threatened. "With the change in status," he says, "it will be possible to import raw fiber and finished cloth made of vicuña." He adds that, although other



ruvian fiber-processing mill, worries about the resurgence of poaching. "Poaching has been diminished because the end-product couldn't be traded legally, but the likelihood of a shadow black market is possible now that harvesting fiber is legal again," he notes. "We need a program that clearly identifies the origin of a fleece and labels end-products as being manufactured from legally harvested fleeces."

In nearby Bolivia, Corzo's worst fears have been realized. Poaching is widespread and the government lacks adequate resources to enforce anti-poaching laws. Adventure travel operators regularly come across slaughtered animals along the Bolivia-Peru border.

In the other countries the picture looks brighter. Argentina's poaching laws are enforced and the vicuña population is increasing rapidly. The Argentine approach to long-term management emphasizes managing herds in immense fenced areas, much like wild animals living in fenced parks in Africa.

Chile has stringent anti-poaching enforcement. Army garrisons, stationed near some of the largest Chilean vicuña herds, make poaching a risky business. Moreover, poachers have been treated harshly in Chile, which has one of South America's most effective police forces.

The tiny population of vicuñas in Ecuador, numbering in the hundreds, is a herd that originated in other Andean countries and was translocated to the Ecuadorian highlands starting in 1988. Fleece collection is impractical until this herd grows substantially.

While Peru and its neighbors have embarked on ambitious and well-intentioned programs, the vicuña's future hinges on a balancing act that allows some exploitation without renewing the commercial poaching that nearly drove the animal to extinction. But integrating deeply held, centuries-old values with a modern management approach allows the vicuña to become a sustainable resource protected by those who live nearest to them. "Vicuñas represent the Andes, the ancient cultures, and the grace of all wild creatures," Martínez says. "The world would not be the same without the beauty of our highland pastures."

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populations have not been fully assessed, the Peruvian vicuñas will likely be included in the reclassification.

To bolster the rights of the villagers, the Peruvian government has passed laws that designate communities as owners of vicuña herds as well as the fleeces produced by the herds. Formerly, vicuñas were state owned.

Martínez has created one of the most dynamic wildlife management programs in the world. But Fernando Corzo, chair of Grupo Inca, a large Pe-

Young vicuña are separated from the herd and released without shearing (right, top) to prevent possible injury. Adults, which can be sheared every two years, are captured by hand (above), then held immobile while they are electrically sheared. One vicuña yields about eight ounces of fleece.

