

The Comeback Camelid

Vicunas were hunted to the brink of extinction and eventually declared an endangered species in 1974.

Story by Eric Hoffman



THE INCA SUN KINGS FORBID THE KILLING OF VICUNAS. INSTEAD THEY USED CEREMONIAL HUNTS, CALLED CHAKUS — AN ENLIGHTENED FORM OF CONSERVATION.

WITH THIS GOLDEN FLEECE CURRENTLY SELLING FOR \$300 PER OUNCE,

WILL IT SURVIVE IN A LAND WHERE CASH IS KING?

The sun is intense, at an altitude of 14,000 feet in Peru's Andean highlands. The vista is a shimmering, great, gray expanse of dry scrub and far-off towering peaks capped with snow. The area has no trees, no cover and nowhere to hide. Some of the villagers begin pointing at a dust cloud moving rapidly down a distant slope. At breakneck speed, vicunas (*Vicugna vicugna*) emerge from the dust, their outstretched necks thrust ahead of their long-legged, lithe bodies.

Vicunas race with giant strides over the rough, rocky surface, parallel to a mile-long

guide rope held by 250 Tuccare villagers. As the animals race past, the villagers sing, yell and wave their arms. It's as if a choreographer has assigned the roles to people and animals alike, and they are well rehearsed.

But the vicunas have been tricked into their performance, and they sense they have been "had." Instead of finding what they knew to be an immense valley and an often-used path, they are greeted with a meandering line of humanity wielding a brightly ribboned rope stretched across the entirety of their escape route. The herd spins this way and that, probing the line for a place to slip through to freedom.

Vicuna fleece was so prized that only the Inca ruler and his court were allowed to wear garments spun from it. Any commoner caught with vicuna fleece was executed.

In a split second the entire endeavor hangs in the balance. The herd, running at full speed in a magnificent display of white underbellies, tawny gold fleeces and outstretched necks, turns directly toward the rope. It appears the lead animal has found an opening.

The boldest vicuna breaks from the herd and runs straight toward the gap, but the alert villagers scramble to fill the empty space, yelling and swinging clothing above their heads. The animal loses its nerve and stops, nostrils flared, and large eyes telegraphing panic and fear. Letting out a high-pitched alarm call, it spins and races through the confused herd, and leads it off in the only direction in which people are not evident.

The animals cannot know that this will lead them into the funnel trap that was laid out the night before.

Ancient traditions

This communal "art form" of catching large groups of vicunas is known as a *chaku* (chah-koo). The method dates back to the Incas, who had annual *chakus* involving

hundreds of thousands of people and animals. The Incas conserved vicunas, rarely butchering them but instead capturing them, primarily to share their amazingly fine fleece.

Vicuna fleece was so prized that only the Inca ruler and his court were allowed to wear garments spun from it. Any commoner caught with vicuna fleece was executed. In 1532, the Spanish killed the last Inca ruler, but the allure and value of vicuna fleece have not diminished over the centuries. In today's market, raw vicuna fleece sells for around \$300 per pound (\$660 a kilogram), which makes it the most valuable legally harvested natural fiber in the world today.

In a bold plan that addressed conservation and protection, the Peruvian government embraced the past to combat the future. The vicuna was declared an endangered species in 1974 because poachers, who were in pursuit of the fleece, shot whole family groups with such deadly efficiency that fewer than 6,000 existed in all of the Andes. With extinction for this most diminutive and graceful

member of the camel family close at hand, conservationists in Peru and the international community responded.

Garnering full protection from IUCN - the World Conservation Union, the vicuna was assigned to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Appendix I includes species that are threatened with extinction, for which international commercial trade is prohibited. This categorization led to a series of international laws forbidding trade in vicunas and their byproducts. These sanctions, along with anti-poaching efforts in Peru, Chile, Argentina and, until recently to a lesser extent, Bolivia, have resulted in perhaps the most dramatic comeback of any threatened camelid in the world.

Moreover, the program succeeded in an impoverished environment, where villagers are often hard pressed to put a meal on the table for their families, let alone worry about supporting a conservation program for local wildlife.

By 2004, the Peruvian vicuna head count stood at between 120,000 and 140,000 animals. There were around 35,000 in Argentina, 20,000 in Chile and perhaps 16,000 in Bolivia, and there was a small transplanted herd in Ecuador.

Consequently, by 1993, the argument that the vicuna must be protected at all costs because its numbers were dangerously low had lost its clout. Clearly, new ideas were needed. The vicuna's fiber offered hope in the cash-poor highlands of Peru, where well over a million nutritionally, educationally and medically deprived people live in small, remote communities.

The finest fleece

There is no doubt that vicuna fleece is a ready, high-value cash crop. As one of the rarest, softest and finest fleeces in the world, it is sought by premium-fiber processors in South America, Europe and Asia. The challenge is to manage vicunas without unwittingly playing into the hands of commercial poachers, who nearly caused the animals' demise in the first place.

The vicuna's tightly controlled Appendix I status has been relaxed to Appendix II in

Preceding pages. Left: A watchful vicuna in Pampa Galeras Nature Reserve, Peru. Above: Members from the native community form a human chain during the annual vicuna roundup called a *chaku* in Pampa Galeras Nature Reserve, Peru.

Hand Harvested Baby Bison and Tibetan Yak Fiber

We gently hand comb our yearling bison and yak to harvest the naturally shedding fiber. Because we harvest only from live, young animals our fiber is the softest and most sinfully luxurious available.

We offer the finest Yak breeding stock available so you can harvest your own fiber. Drop us a line sometime.

Jim@SpringBrookRanch.com
www.SpringBrookRanch.com
406-257-7021



Top: Vicunas trapped inside a fence during a *chaku*. Middle: Hand dehairing a vicuna fleece. Bottom: Fernando Alvarez (left), president of Jacques Carties Clothier, inspecting a dehaired vicuna fleece.



most parts of Peru, Chile, Argentina and Bolivia, where the animals are found in family groups in the stark highlands, usually above 14,700 feet. The change in status allows commercial harvesting of vicuna fiber but still forbids international export of the animals, or hunting of them. The question facing vicuna policy

makers in all four countries is how to allow commercial harvesting in a way that includes indigenous villagers while discouraging illegal poaching.

In Peru, the person at the center of management decisions was Dr. Alfonso Martinez, president of Consejo Nacional de Camelidos Sud American (CONACS). Appointed in 1991, at age 34, to this prestigious ministry position by Peru's then President Alberto Fujimori, Martinez was responsible for recommending policies, affecting the management of alpacas, llamas, guanacos and vicunas — the four South American camel family species.

Law School, grew up in a region long known for its vicuna herds. He understood the harsh realities of living in rural Peru and the local attitudes toward wildlife. Reviving the ancient *chaku*, and involving

locals in the capture, shearing and marketing of vicuna fleece, Martinez believed, offered the best chance to link rural communities to the animals' management and protection.

"People have a financial incentive to protect vicunas for their valuable fleeces, which are shorn every two years," Martinez said in a 2000 interview.

He organized the first "new age" *ckaku* in 1993 and invited President Fujimori to watch. Fujimori went home convinced. Each year there have been more and more *chakus*. By 2004 there were nearly 200, and around 40,000 vicunas, or one third of the population throughout Peru, were captured, sheared and released.

Martinez organized legislation that allowed fiber collected by villagers to be purchased in a public auction attracting the large fiber mills and fashion houses from around the world. Collaborating with two Italian businesses, Grupo Inca, a large Peruvian fiber-processing mill, became the first to turn vicuna fleece into high-priced garments in conjunction with the *chaku* program.



Top: A vicuna herd trapped inside an enclosure. Bottom: Guarding captured vicunas during a *chaku*.

The auction was structured to give the villagers most of the \$300-per-pound price.

Extended benefits, new threats

In 2000, the Fujimori government collapsed (due to scandals unrelated to vicuna policies). The collapse created uncertainty for vicuna management because Fujimori's cabinet, including Martinez, was also sacked. For a time it looked as though the programs Martinez had put into place might be abandoned. After the election of President Alejandro Toledo, however, Enrique Moya was appointed to head CONACS and after reviewing the program, decided to not only endorse *chakus*, but also expand the program.

This philosophy continued under the current Alan Garcia presidency, which began in 2006. The Garcia government also initially endorsed

breeding practices to create hybrid paco-vicunas — the product of a union between an alpaca and a vicuna. The two species are closely related (the vicuna is the wild progenitor of the alpaca) and when bred to one another will produce fertile offspring. The government reasoned that the paco-vicuna hybrid would result in an increase in fiber yield and subsequently net larger profits.

Concerns about the creation of paco-vicuna hybrids were addressed in the Andean Vicuna Convention held in La Paz, Bolivia in November 2007. High-ranking representatives from all the Andean countries (Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Argentina and Ecuador) with vicunas attended. They issued a statement condemning the creation of paco-vicunas and stating that paco-vicunas should be treated as vicunas (not domestic animals like

There is no doubt that vicuna fleece is a ready, high-value cash crop. As one of the rarest, softest and finest fleeces in the world, it is sought by premium-fiber processors in South America, Europe and Asia.

Get your fiber fanatic fix here!

Table Rock Llamas & Fiber Arts Studio, Inc. & the DyeWorks

Come experience the wonderful world of fiber!

All your needs for spinning, weaving, knitting, crochet, felting, Jacquard & Gaywool dyes, DyeWorks natural dye extracts, books, patterns, supplies and classes.

Open Tues thru Fri 10-5, Sat 10-4

6520 Shoup Road
Colorado Springs,
CO 80908

Phone: 719 - 495 - 7747
www.tablerockllamas.com

Chiapas
Feb. 22-Mar. 2, 2008

Explore the highland villages of Chiapas and learn about weaving traditions from Chamula and Zinacantan.

Oaxaca
July 18-26, 2008

Visit with weavers and dyers in Teotitlan del Valle and experience the local celebration of the Guelaguetza.

Call 734-769-7839

We specialize in small groups that enable everyone to get the maximum experience from their trip. You will see Mexico like you've never seen it before!

Join Us!

www.tiastephanietours.com

alpacas) under international treaties. The underlying fear expressed at the La Paz convention was that the crossing of these two species would eventually corrupt both the vicuna and alpaca genomes and have a

fleece, which is coarser than vicuna, could be expected to drop in fleece weight when crossed with vicuna. The Garcia government, in effect, reversed itself and joined its Andean neighbors to protect the vicuna as a

In Bolivia, Wheeler's worst fears and greatest hopes have been realized in a space of a few years.

negative impact on the vicuna's special niche as the most sought-after specialty fiber because of its consistent fineness that always falls between twelve and sixteen microns. Many scientists attending the Andean Vicuna Convention believed alpaca/vicuna hybrid crosses would have coarser fleeces outside the vicuna's normal parameters of fineness and undermine the vicuna fiber market when their fleeces were added to it. They reasoned that the impact in the alpaca gene pool could cause problems as well. Vicunas only produce between 250 (9 ounces) and 500 grams (1.1 pounds) of fiber when shorn, while alpacas produce between four and ten pounds annually. Alpaca

distinct species with one of the world's most sought-after luxury fibers.

The strength of the *chaku* program is that it includes the *compesinos* who live near vicunas, who might be tempted to poach them to put meat on their table. "In Peru alone, there are more than 200,000 families living in vicuna habitat," says Dr. Jane Wheeler, a member of the IUCN Camelid Specialist Group and president of CONOPA Inc, a nonprofit organization involved in conservation and research of all four South American camelid species. "This amounts to a million people. This creates a significant challenge to see how people and vicunas can best coexist. The *chaku* program provides

the potential to include these people in protection efforts because they benefit from harvesting the fiber."

To bolster the rights of the villagers, the Peruvian government passed laws that designate communities as owners of vicuna herds, and of the fleeces that are harvested from them. Vicunas were formerly state owned. Local involvement and ownership were coupled with anti-poacher laws and military units that track down poachers when significant losses occur. Wheeler points out that this part of the program has produced some dubious results. "The ownership provision resulted in many *compesino* communities putting their 'wild' herds into fenced areas, which has disrupted the dispersal of young males to new herds as the normal means of spreading genetic diversity," she says. Thousands of vicunas are now behind fences. This practice has resulted in some highly inbred populations and the spread of herd-threatening diseases transmitted from nearby domestic sheep and cattle kept by the same villagers. Furthermore, animals kept in a fenced area can't seek out new pastures in time of drought. The



often casual enforcement of poaching laws was also cited as a problem area in the recent Andean Vicuna Convention.

Can it be sustained?

There is no doubt Martinez created one of the most innovative wildlife management programs in the world. It has held up fairly well, with populations continuing to grow, despite some reported poaching. What is not entirely clear is how well the program will work in the future. Wheeler endorses the *chaku* program without captive fencing but worries about the resurgence of poaching and the inconsistencies in enforcement and safeguards from one country to another. "Poaching was reduced when no aspect of the vicuna could be traded, but now

with legal harvesting of fiber in place a black market is possible," she says. "Vigilance will be needed." The meager funding of government programs and the vast, remote areas of vicuna habitat compound these fears. Currently, the primary checks on poaching are the cash-poor communities in vicuna territory. It is hoped the vested interest in financial gain from the legal harvest of fleece will motivate villagers to curtail poaching activities.

In Bolivia, Wheeler's worst fears and greatest hopes have been realized in a space of a few years. Poaching was widespread (there were no resources assigned to enforce anti-poaching laws until recently) and there was no government supervised fiber-harvesting program. Although highly illegal, vicuna skins can be found

on sale in La Paz, Bolivia's capital. Recently, however, the Bolivian government has begun monitoring its wild populations and committed its conservation effort to maintaining herds in their wild settings, while other countries have begun herding their vicunas into fenced areas.

Derek Michell, a third generation alpaca fiber processor and the director of Michell & Company, believes clearly defined financial incentives at all stages are the key to maintaining a viable program. "Collecting fiber from a wild vicuna is challenging, and made more challenging because the vicuna is an endangered species that must be treated well," he says. "Capturing, shearing and fiber processing require many people with different skills. The villagers, who capture the animals, will protect

The property will be listed for sale with a major broker in mid-October. Register your potential interest now to avoid that expense.

Land Running! Camelid Paradise!

Looking for a place for your adventure with camelids? Here is one that has almost 20 years of experience. Hundreds of alpacas and llamas have enjoyed the view! 95+ acres comprised of three lots, a beautiful second home with investment potential. Enjoy the charisma of Vermont.

For more information contact: Lars and Gayle Garrison
West Mountain Farm, Inc., 240 Maltese Road, Stamford, VT 05352
802 694 1417 • llamawmf@sover.net • www.WestMountainFarm.com

the vicunas in their area if they share in the profits from the fiber and the manufacturers will support the *chakus* because this is the source of the fiber. The correct incentives, without too much red tape, are the key.”

“There is a cultural component that is hard to describe but very powerful,” Michell adds. “The vicuna, because of its natural beauty, extremely fine fleece and place in the rich history of Peru, brings together all aspects of our society when its fiber is collected.”

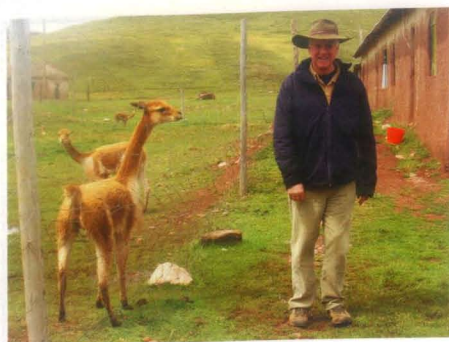
Alonzo Burgos is an employee of the large fiber processor Grupo Inca. “Integration of private enterprise into government programs to help run a tightly controlled vicuna registry will make poaching difficult,” he says. “We need to maintain a program that clearly identifies where a fleece came from, and labels end products as manufactured from legally harvested fleeces.”

Herbert Murrillo, who is the manager of development (gerente de desarrollo) at the prestigious Michell & Co, the marquee alpaca fiber processor in Peru, thinks the structure of how the fiber is collected and obtained by processors is the key to the program maintaining its integrity. “Stopping illegal hunting is important, but the main instrument to avoid this practice, and a black market, will be to allow legal processing with reasonable controls which allow processors to obtain the fiber without unnecessary obstacles,” he says. Michell & Co. buys about 1,000 kilograms, or 15 percent, of the national clip and produces vicuna scarves, shawls and capes that are primarily aimed at the European, North American and Asian markets.

The point Murrillo makes about “allowing processors to obtain the fiber...” is an important one in Peru’s national scheme. The original national harvest of 6,000 kilograms (2,700 pounds) was doled out to a small group of manufacturers, which left other companies out of the processing loop, making a black market more appealing than it needed to be.

“For some years exclusivity over the vicuna clip was achieved by the International Vicuna Consortium, made up of three companies: Loropiana, Agnoga and Grupo Inca,” says Murrillo. “They purchased all of the fiber annually at a government auction. However, this has changed and now many companies are involved in processing vicuna with governmental authorization. The companies must abide by regulations that include recording where end products are sold. This is a form of accountability.”

Several fiber processors expressed doubts about the adequacy of governmental resources to actually record



these transactions. Peru led the way by developing a labeling system that identifies garments created through the government-sanctioned *chaku* program. There is no doubt that Peru has embarked on an ambitious and well-meant program. Its success remains to be seen as it attempts to generate cooperation among people with diverse interests and backgrounds.

In other countries, which do not have fiber-processing plants, the ability to follow fiber from animal to end product becomes more difficult. For fiber collection and processing to have integrity, the clip and end product should occur in the country of origin. “When raw fiber is moved across borders problems are more apt to occur,” Wheeler says.

Michell captures the essence of the vicuna. “Vicunas run like the wind and are living symbols of the Andes and its magnificent past cultures,” he says. “Their fiber produces a light garment with exceptional insulating qualities. It has the best luster of all fiber and is the most radiant cloth at any fashion festival. The Andes would not be the same without the beauty of vicunas in our highland pastures.” *WF*

About the author:

Eric Hoffman is the primary author of *The Complete Alpaca Book*, Revised Second Edition, pp 617, Bonny Doon Press LLC, 2006 and author of more than 200 articles on all species of camelids. His past work has appeared in *International Wildlife*, *Living Planet* (World Wildlife Fund), *Pacific Discovery* (California Academy of Sciences) and *Wildlife Conservation* (New York Zoological Society). He also authored the first DNA based alpaca registry in the world. Eric and his wife, Sherry Edensmith, have raised llamas and alpacas for thirty years.

Author Eric Hoffman with vicuna in Peru.



Indulge your passion for fiber with Spin-Off magazine

Spin-Off brings you:

- ♦ The best teachers teaching the best spinning tricks and techniques
- ♦ The newest information: fibers, tools, books, events, people, and places
- ♦ The warmest, fullest stories of spinning history and tradition
- ♦ The coolest handspun projects that you can make

Subscribe Now!

Call (800) 272-2193
or go to spinoffmagazine.com