

by Michael Kreger

Sustainable Use for Vicuña Conservation

*H*igh in the Andes Mountains of South America (at an altitude of 12,000 to 15,700 feet, or about 3,700 to 4,600 meters) lives the rarest of six species of camels and llamas: the vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*). You might not think that this species, native to remote alpine grasslands in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina, would be of commercial interest worldwide. However, a coat made from the tawny and white wool of the vicuña can sell for \$35,000.

Due to the exceptional quality of its wool, vicuña populations cascaded from an estimated several million animals in the 1500s to fewer than 15,000 in the late 1960s. The decline led to the species being listed in 1970 as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969 (precursor to the Endangered Species Act of 1973) and being added in 1975 to Appendix I of

CITES, the highest level of international trade protection.

The major threat to this animal was not habitat destruction but illegal trade. The high value of the wool in an economically poor area represented both a threat and an opportunity to sustainably manage the species. Illegal hunting predominated when protection and incentives for management were lacking.

Opportunities for sustainable use increased when proceeds from the sale of wool from live-shorn animals were directed back to improve the lives of native Andean people, thereby encouraging them to protect the vicuña. In recent years, range countries also have enacted federal and/or provincial laws to control trade.

Laws and decrees also support captive-breeding operations and commercialization of products from captive-bred animals, ensuring stewardship of vicuñas by campesinos (peasants) and campesino communities. In a sustainable-use program, wild vicuñas are herded, captured, shorn of their fleece, and released unharmed.

In Peru, the National Council of South American Camelids has developed techniques for capturing and harvesting wool from wild vicuñas, and has taught and supervised campesinos in vicuña management. Shearing takes just two minutes per animal. Vicuña management provides employment for many members of the community. Campesinos build fences, obtain and clean fleece, provide protection to vicuñas, and offer instruction to other communities wishing to establish a vicuña industry. Strict law enforcement and population monitoring deter illegal hunting.

Wild vicuñas are rounded up in pens so they can be shorn of their fleece.





By the 1990s, the global vicuña population showed dramatic growth, reaching an estimated 250,000 animals. The increased numbers led the World Conservation Union to move the vicuña to a classification of “lower risk, conservation dependent” in 1996. Between 1987 and 1997, CITES countries responded by downlisting many vicuña populations to Appendix II to allow import and export of wool and wool products for commercial purposes.

After CITES’ success in promoting the sustainable use of vicuña, the Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed the biological status of the species and reclassified populations in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru from endangered to threatened in 2002. A special rule allows vicuña products to once again enter the U.S., provided that CITES conditions are satisfied. An additional non-CITES condition required by the U.S. is that range countries submit an annual report detailing vicuña management, trade, and conservation. The Service reviews the reports every two years to determine if management programs are continuing to provide conservation benefits.

For the vicuña, this has meant a resumption of legal international trade in cloth, fiber, and finished products, such as coats, and handicrafts. To ensure that only Appendix-II populations are involved, all products traded must be labeled with logotypes adopted by the range countries through the Convention for the Conservation and Management of Vicuña with the name of the country of origin of the wool. Peruvian products, for example, are labeled ‘Vicuña-Peru’ or ‘Vicuña-Peru-Artesanía,’ depending on the type of product.

By encouraging well-managed sustainable use, CITES and the Endangered Species Act continue to play an important role in the long-term conservation of the vicuña.

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