



Poaching of Vicuña and the Illegal Commercialization of its Fiber: A Persisting Problem



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International Union for Conservation of Nature





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South American Camelid Specialist Group (IUCN SSC GECS)

Fifty years ago, with a global population of 10,000 individuals, the vicuña was threatened with extinction by exploitation of its valuable fiber and the lack of population management.



Vicuña carcasses in Vilama, Argentina,
© Freddy Burgos

The collective effort of local, national, and international conservation strategies lead to its recovery and today, a total population of 500,000 is found in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. The adoption of the Vicuña Convention (1979), the prohibition of international trade, and the establishment of natural protected areas were key in the first stage of the conservation program. In recent years, implementation of sustainable use initiatives for the benefit of local communities, and transfer of numerous populations to CITES Appendix II, has further improved the

species' status. The recovery of this species is one of the premier-success stories of international conservation and illustrates the positive result of collaboration and the sum of complementary actions resulting in wildlife conservation in Latin America.

Three and a half decades after the signing of the Vicuña Convention, illegal hunting continues to be the primary threat to the species. According to the documentation submitted by the countries in attendance at the XXVII Technical Meeting of the Convention (La Paz, July 2014), in Bolivia alone at least 3,289 vicuñas were hunted illegally between 2008 and 2013, with an important domestic market for fiber and handcrafts. In Argentina, 149 illegal takes of vicuña were reported between 2012 and 2013, while in 2014 94 skins were seized. In Peru, 1,723 were reported killed for the period 2009-2013. In Chile, just during the first months of 2014, at least 49 dead vicuñas were found by patrols. As these data are based only on official reports, it can be assumed that the true number of hunted animals is significantly larger. On the one hand, the very few patrol efforts limit the



Vicuña carcass at Salar de Surire, Chile,
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possibility of identifying evidence of hunting. On the other hand, many hunting events go unreported as locals fear illegal hunters, distances from hunting sites to towns with police presence are large, police forces tend not to act, or those that report hunters fear becoming suspects themselves.



Illegal fiber at El Alto, Bolivia, © Corsino Huallhata

Among the factors that facilitate poaching of vicuñas in the high Andes are: 1) The wide geographic range of vicuña populations and the extensive frontier areas among the countries involved; 2) The geographical characteristics of the area, with low population density and high degree of isolation; 3) Lack of human and technical resources devoted to the control of the species in its range countries; 4) High value of the fiber and vicuña products in the international market; 5) Existence of a substantial fiber market for fiber and illegal handcrafts at the local level; 6) Lack of effective punishment for illegal hunters; 7) Insufficient confiscation events; 8) Limited coordinated security forces within and between countries; 9) Limited benefits to local communities, and sometimes insufficient support and incentives to develop legal vicuña use, resulting in greater benefits from illegal than from legal uses.



Illegal vicuña garments, Bolivia, © Corsino Huallhata

The South American Camelid Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (UICN SSC GECS) sees the need to emphasize the concerns of countries party to the Vicuña Convention and to alert the international community, before the survival of the vicuña is threatened once again.

To this end, UICN SSC GECS considers of fundamental importance:

a) On Cooperation among Andean countries:

1. Intensification of cooperation among neighboring countries, including security forces, for the control of international boundaries and promotion of experience sharing, in order to optimize efforts to eliminate illegal traffic.
2. Critical revision of the compliance with previous agreements and documents, developed during Technical Meetings of the Vicuña Convention on vicuña illegal hunting and trafficking, as well as the minutes from 2004 to the present.
3. Creation of a glossary that includes products and subproducts of vicuña, to facilitate fiscalization along the chain of commercialization.

4. Detailed study and analysis of the methods used by poachers and illegal trade of fiber and skins at the national and regional level, as well as their impact on vicuña conservation and in economic terms.
5. Standardized registry in the five countries of legally obtained fiber, its processing, imports and exports, in order to be able to monitor its commercialization.
6. Establishment of standardized processes for the correct use of the VICUÑA-COUNTRY OF ORIGIN brand and their commitment to apply it correctly.

b) At the National level:

1. Information dissemination regarding legal sanctions and the updating of national, regional, and local laws to make them more effective against poaching and illegal commercialization of vicuña fiber and products.
2. Facilitation and support of local Andean communities in the development of technical and organizational capacities to harvest fiber from vicuñas under strict animal well-being protocol and strengthening local community organizations.
3. Governmental support to local Andean communities in the commercialization and value added processes of legal fiber, simplifying the process and strengthening the stages of the legal chain of commercialization.
4. Supply of sufficient fiber for artisanal use at subsidized prices, to minimize use of illegal fiber and increasing value added processes in the countries of origin
5. Reinforcing and implementation at the national level of schemes of supervision, legal oversight, and tracing origins of the fiber, from shearing to its conclusion on the supply chain (shearing, storage, transformation, commercialization, and export).
6. Permanent training of police, judicial and customs authorities, with respect to legislation and other subjects related to production and movement of fiber, as well as identification of camelid fibers and their subproducts.
7. The intensification of seizures of illegal clothing and the implementation of sanctions to those involved in purchasing or selling them.
8. Implementation of informative and awareness building campaigns, especially at touristic sites and airports, alerting tourists of the requirements to be met by legal vicuña fiber products.

c) On the Cooperation between exporting and importing countries

1. Strengthening of local cooperation networks and swifter communication between CITES authorities and importing and exporting countries.
2. Development and collaboration in the implementation of systems to trace the origin of vicuña products and subproducts, to be implemented internationally.
3. The strengthening of controls in the importing countries regarding the processing and marketing vicuña products and subproducts.

Finally, we consider important the support to the consolidation of the International Organization for Vicuña Managers in the five countries party to the Agreement, as well as the development of national, representative and transparent associations, in order to achieve that “... *the conservation of the vicuña is an economic production alternative under close State supervision that benefits Andean communities ...*” as in indicated in Article 1 of the Vicuña Agreement.