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Conservation, crime and communities:

Vicuña management in the Andes, Latin America

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At a glance

COUNTRY	Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru
LOCATION	Not site speciific
SPECIES	Vicuña, (*Vicugna vicugna*)
ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE CONTEXT	Globalized market of vicuña fiber increasing and getting more complex with exports and re exports. Rising levels of poaching in some countries
TYPE OF POACHERS	Mostly outsiders; organized well equipped gangs
TYPE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TACKLING IWT	Community rangers/eco-guards Community intelligence gathering
CONSERVATION INCENTIVE MECHANISM	Legally recognized community based natural resource management institutions Sustainable harvesting and trade of vicuna fibre

The story so far

Vicuña are endangered camelids – listed on CITES Appendix II and I – whose ranges cover the Andean countries of South America. Vicuña fibre is a valuable commodity and community-based management

has been used as a mechanism for encouraging conservation and tolerance of vicuñas in community lands, while at the same time contributing to local economic development and poverty alleviation.

An international Vicuña Convention agreed in 1979 has long specified that it should be local people who are the beneficiaries from vicuña use. However, this has not been consistently translated into national laws by the countries concerned. Indeed, policy affecting local rights to use natural resources varies from country to country.

In Argentina, reform of the constitution 20 years ago devolved rights over natural resources to the local level but the absence of specific legal reference to ownership rights over the vicuñas created a opening for private companies that are not even based in the Andes, to establish a foothold in vicuña management.

In Peru and Bolivia, by contrast, communities have been granted custody and legal ownership of the vicuna living within their jurisdiction.

Vicuña carcasses, Vilama, Argentina (Freddy Burgos)

An international success story

Vicuna conservation in the Andes is an international success story of collaboration in conservation. Fifty years ago, over-exploitation coupled with a lack of management threatened the animal with extinction. The global population was down to 10,000 individuals.

A trade ban under CITES on the export of vicuña pelts and the creation of the Vicuña Convention paved the way to creating a shared vision and collective conservation effort which led the recovery of the species. Today, the vicuña population is around 500,000 individuals. Once population recovery was underway, the opening up of trade — albeit regulated — and the subsequent incentives for sustainable use by local communities has further improved the status and long term outlook for the vicuña.

Illegal trade continues

Poaching levels dropped dramatically in the face of coordinated trade regulations and the rise in local management initiatives. However, illegal trade continues to persist, and illegal hunting is the primary threat to vicuña. In all Andean countries of the vicuña's range, how to combat illegal wildlife trade remains a test for policy makers and local communities.

The scale of the problem was highlighted in reports submitted to the XXVII Technical Meeting of the Vicuña Convention, held in La Paz in July 2014. The worst figures came from Bolivia - which has an important domestic market for fibre and handcrafts - where at least 3,289 vicuñas were hunted illegally between 2008 and 2013.

In Argentina, poaching of 149 vicuña was reported between 2012 and 2013, and 94 skins were seized in 2014. In Peru, 1,723 vicuña were reported killed for the period 2009 to 2013. In Chile, at least 49 dead vicuñas were found by patrols during the first few months of 2014.

All these figures are based on official reports, which means it is likely that the true loss is much higher. Poaching is facilitated by numerous factors, such as the extensive area of vicuña ranges, low population density and high community isolation.

Poverty is widespread across the area concerned, and with limited support and incentive to develop legal vicuña use, there is sometimes more financial gain from illegal than legal use. Security and enforcement, both in and between countries, is weak.

Most of the trade in vicuña fibre is international, although there is a local black market for fibre in Bolivia for ritual use, handcrafts and folk costumes. Black market trade values are between US$100–200 per kg, depending on colour and quality. These rates are significantly lower than the cost of fibre traded legally, which ranges between US$300–600 per kg.

Illegal Fiber at El Alto, Bolivia (Corsino Hualhata)

Difficulties in fibre traceability

Distinguishing illegally-traded fibre is hampered by the difficulties in fibre traceability and complex patterns of exports and re-exports. More communities, and private companies, are getting involved in vicuña management without any increase in government's investment towards fibre traceability.

The role of local communities in combatting poaching is typically as informants. Many communities have local guards and some have developed monitoring systems. However, it is rare for a community to have the resources to pay for their members to work as rangers. Furthermore, in most countries other than Peru, community members are not allowed to use guns during their patrols leaving them vulnerable to attack from armed poachers.

Only in exceptional cases, such as Lucanas in Peru, are the numbers of vicuña and fibre production high enough to generate rewards for anti-poaching activities. Most communities are unable to match the vehicles and communication systems used by poachers, who are also often armed. Not surprisingly, local people fear the illegal hunters.

When incidents occur, many go unreported for a number of reasons. There is a fear of reprisals and the distances between communities and towns where there is a police force can be considerable. Most of the areas lack communication and a good road system. In general, the police tend not to act, and people worry that if they do report hunters they will become suspects.

What works and why?

Collectively, throughout the Andean region, the principle of community-based management of sustainable use has had a dramatic impact in reversing the decline of vicuña populations. In addition, community-based vicuña management has been able to achieve multiple goals such as strengthening local communities, revitalising old traditions, creating relationships among communities, recuperating local knowledge, developing a framework for local participation, solidifying land claims, providing incentives to avoid migration to cities, and providing alternative sources of income to communities that are usually forgotten by nation states. This success was due to a concerted collaborative effort over many years.

Common factors that occur where indigenous management schemes are particularly effective include strong community organisation, community empowerment, state support, multiple stakeholder involvement including NGOs, sufficient funding and technical and scientific support.

Challenges

- In some communities, low levels of income generated by vicuña management and the difficulties of fibre commercialisation reduce interest in support for vicuña management and anti-poaching.

- Better means of communication is needed within vicuña management communities.

- Poor infrastructure in rural areas, such as roads, isolates communities and reduces their ability to participate in anti-poaching.

- A fairer distribution of benefits derived from vicuña use within local communities is needed.

- Lack of funding reduces support for community management initiatives and investment in fibre traceability.

- National policies, legislative frameworks and enforcement are generally weak; poachers can operate with impunity.

- Local communities are increasingly at risk from poaching activities.

Lessons learnt

- Strengthening community participation is key.

- Local communities need exclusive user rights over the vicuña.

- It is not enough to rely solely on community engagement to fight poaching. Vicuña fibre has such high market value and the potential reward for illegal trade is so high, that government involvement is crucial.

- Collaboration between authorities at national and international level is important.

- Community management would be more effective if linked with awareness-raising in the destination countries so that consumers demand certified, legally produced fibre.

COULD THIS WORK ELSEWHERE?

Community-based initiatives for sustainable management of vicuña is already widespread throughout the Andes. However, to fight poaching you have to fight poverty. If communities had access to better communication, roads and transport systems, more state presence and a greater stake in decision-making, a strategy could be designed so that the authorities would do their job but rely on local communities for support and vigilance at local level.