



## **Chacu!**

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By Mike Safley

1995

The wild Vicuna stood rigid and still a mere three feet away. Her round ebony eyes mirrored the image of man -- her mortal enemy for more than ten thousand years. She seemed to be simultaneously contemplating escape and submission. The cria stood boldly at her side, while the Chacu swirled on around them.

Vicuna are one of nature's most elegant creations, with long fragile necks and oversized heads that somehow suggest an extra-terrestrial intelligence. The coppery golden color of their fleece is punctuated by the long, silky white hair found at their breast. This smallest member of the camelid family has the largest heart, by 50 percent, of any mammal its size.

The hair of the Vicuna is the world's finest natural fiber, measuring 12 to 13 microns. The cloth woven from its fleece is the world's most exclusive. The fashion houses of Armani and Channel passionately compete for this rarest of natural commodities. An ounce of Vicuna fleece, unprocessed, sells for five times more than an ounce of pure silver.

Why had this Vicuna, standing an arm's length away, only recently pulled back from the brink of extinction? Vicunas and Guanacos populated the western face of South America for hundreds of thousands of years, their numbers so large they were impossible to count. Then one hapless day, man appeared on the horizon and their numbers began a 10,000 a year retreat into the present.

The Guanaco and Vicuna hunters pursued their wild prey for more than 7,000 years before eventually domesticating them. The nomadic Selk-Nam Indians of Patagonia knew the Guanacos well, often exploiting their natural curiosity by crawling on the ground to portray a wounded animal, then jumping up and driving a spear into the fatally attracted camelid.

The Vicuna hunters of the Peruvian Puna led a sedentary life, living among the stationary families of Vicuna. These Indians often hunted Vicuna by running them into man-made pits. Occasionally a cria survived and they became the domesticated foundation stock of the modern day Alpaca.

The Incas, and before them the Tiwanaku and Wari people, refined the practice of raising huge herds of Llamas and Alpacas, turning their fleece into fine cloth. The Incan rulers, with their gift for organizing and governing vast territories, elevated the wild Vicuna to exclusive status in the empire.

The Sun Kings forbid the killing of Vicuna. Instead, ceremonial hunts, or Chacus, were held annually. These hunts were an enlightened form of conservation. Thirty thousand Indians would form a half circle, beating drums and chanting, as the Vicuna ran before them. With the human circle growing ever tighter, tens of thousands of Vicunas were soon surrounded.

The Vicuna were counted. The old and infirm slaughtered for their pelts and meat. The females, their cria, and the best male specimens were shorn and released. Thus, the Vicuna prospered as the harvest of priceless fiber found its way to the Incan royal warehouses.

When the Spaniards arrived atop their horses, with visions of sheep and cattle in their heads, camelids, once too numerous to count, were slaughtered and disrespected. Previously unknown diseases were introduced into the native herds by the Spanish sheep and the population was further wasted.

In 1777 the Spanish colonists passed a law forbidding the hunting of Vicuna. However, the killing continued until there “were almost none.” After Peru gained independence from Spain, General Simon Bolivar, Peru’s first governor, issued many decrees dictating severe punishment for anyone who killed the fragile Vicuna. The governments of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina followed suit, but nothing stopped the rape of the Vicuna. Their fleece was too valuable to allow the defenseless Vicuna to live. Poachers prevailed.

The Vicuna was finally declared an endangered species and in 1965 the region known as Pampa Galeras, in the Peruvian Department of Ayacucho, was designated as a national Vicuna reserve. The project began with 16,000 acres and 1,000 Vicunas.

Dr. William Franklin came to Pampa Galeras in 1968 to embark on what would become the definitive study of Vicuna sociology. He observed the Vicunas primary social groups. He found families made up of six to eight females and one male, grazing 40 to 50 acres on a permanent basis and sleeping in adjacent, highly defined areas along the ridges overlooking their pasture.

These families, without fail, expel their cria annually. The banished males join nomadic herds of 25 to 50 male Vicunas. They roam the lesser pastures of the puna until they acquire their own females and a grazing territory large enough to support their families. The female driven from her family seeks admittance into a new family unit. Thus, nature avoids the perils of inbreeding. Each Vicuna group occupies and defends an ecologically appropriate pasture, never overgrazing.

By guarding and expanding the reserve at Pampa Galeras, adding new reserves throughout Peru, and curtailing commerce in Vicuna pelts by use of the Endangered Species Act, the Vicuna avoided extinction. But the poachers persisted and the long term health of the Vicuna population was far from assured.

In 1986, the Peruvian company, Grupo Inca, was laboring to create a plan that would save the Vicuna forever. These were no ordinary conservationists. Their roots were in Alpaca textile manufacturing. The company was co-founded by Swiss and Peruvian families, the Pattheys and Corzos. The company is now headed by Francois Patthey and Fernando Corzo, a second generation of enlightened family leadership.

Grupo Inca is motivated by capitalism, but the soul of their company is driven by many conservationist pursuits. Projects which demonstrate their commitment to the landscape of Peru include the Manu Foundation and an internationally acclaimed book of the same name published in conjunction with the New York Zoological Society. Manu, a Peruvian rain forest located in the Amazon Valley, is recognized as one of the most significant ecological parks in the world. Their recently published book Gold of the Andes depicts the history of South American camelids. They also operate the Sallalli foundation dedicated to the improvement of Alpaca breeding in the Alta Plano of Peru.

Fernando Corzo explained the essence of the Grupo Inca philosophy for saving the Vicuna by reciting their battle cry, “Shear a Vicuna to Save a Vicuna.” He finished by explaining that “no poacher is interested in shooting a shorn Vicuna.” This concept, married to the Inca model of Vicuna management, became the genesis for a unique plan to conserve the Vicuna by organizing its commercialization.

Grupo Inca initiated a complex strategy which required the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to reclassify the Vicuna. CITES is an international body organized to regulate the trade and treatment of animals and their product between countries. Most, but not all, countries belong to and observe the rules set by the organization. Changing the Vicuna from an endangered species to an appendix II animal would allow the animals' fleece to be harvested and manufactured into cloth.

In 1986 Grupo Inca received permission from the Peruvian government to manufacturer a cloth sample using fleece from the hides of dead Vicunas confiscated from poachers. This cloth was presented to the International Conference of CITES in Ottawa, Canada in 1987. As a result, Peru was granted permission to manufacture cloth so long as the fleece was harvested from live animals and manufactured in the country of origin.

This change of status made it legal to sell Vicuna products around the world for the first time in over 30 years. These new regulations represented significant progress, but the most delicate problem of all remained -- Peruvian politics. It was still illegal to harvest the fleece in Peru and ownership of live Vicuna was vested in the government. Longstanding Peruvian law also made it illegal to export Llamas and Alpacas from Peru. All this was about to change.

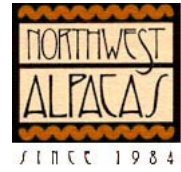
Peru had just elected a new president, Alberto Fujii Mori, a Peruvian of Japanese descent. He was an unknown university professor, specializing in agrarian economics, until two weeks before the election. A complex set of circumstances conspired to catapult Fujii Mori into the presidency. Peruvian politics, always byzantine, were now turned upside down.

The new president immediately set about rebuilding Peru. Decades of misguided laws and policies fostered by communist and socialist rule were swept aside. The leader of the deadly Shining Path guerrillas, Ismael Guzman, was captured, dressed in striped pajamas for the world to see, and locked in an island prison for life. After five years of Fujii Mori's rule, Peru is beginning to prosper. The story of the Vicuna provides a micro view of how Fujii Mori has worked his magic.

In 1991, Peru passed an innovative new law to govern the management of all camelids. For instance, it became legal to export Alpacas and Llamas. The ownership of Vicuna production was transferred from the government to the Compensinos (Indians) and their village communities. A new government entity, the Council of National Camelids of South America (CONACS), was formed to manage camelid agriculture.

CONACS had the power to act, but inertia set in and little happened until, once again, politics played a role. Fujii Mori was impatient and he demanded action for the Vicuna program, not more bureaucracy. Into the breach stepped a second personality, almost as unique as Fujii Mori -- a Quecha Indian lawyer.

Dr. Alfonso Martinez Vargas was born in Puquio, not far from Pampa Galenas and the Vicunas' heartland. He moved to Lima at age 13 and later studied law. His vision helped create CONACS. When the new commission failed to energize the Vicunas' commercialization to the benefit of the compensinos, Fujii Mori appointed Martinez president of the organization.



Mother Nature’s invisible hand seemed to be orchestrating the Vicunas’ salvation. First, Grupo Inca, represented by Francois Patthey, obtained international approval for the sale of Vicuna products. Then, Alfonso Martinez, aided by Fuji Mori, placed ownership of this valuable resource where it belonged --with the Quecha ancestors of the Inca Sun Kings. Having established ownership and the potential market for their newly acquired assets, the Indian communities, guided by Martinez, joined together to form the International Society of Vicuna Breeders.

This society is over three hundred communities strong and represents all the villages with Vicuna habitat in their vicinity. Through this new entity, the breeders can collectively negotiate the sale of the fleece which they inherited from their Incan ancestors.

All the elements for the commercialization and conservation of the Vicuna were now in place. The world stage was set, textile manufactures from Italy, Japan, Germany, and England all wanted a piece of the Vicuna action. The Peruvian textile house, Condor Tips, owned by the Grupo Inca, coveted the prestige associated with marketing Vicuna to the world’s fashion centers. Mother Nature seemed to be whispering in the ear of Dr. Martinez as he drafted a plan to hold an international competition for the right to buy the entire production of the Vicuna Breeders Society. He wanted an agreement which would prosper his fellow compensinos and have the potential to perpetually ensure the Vicunas’ well being.

Martinez embraced the Incan concept of sustainable harvest as he drafted the bid specifications, saying “Our ancestors were managing Vicuna intelligently over 1,000 years ago.” He required each bidder to include a plan and financing to enhance conservation efforts, thereby proving their commitment to the long term health of the Vicuna. He added another unique feature -- upfront funding of a portion of the contract. No empty promises would be tolerated.

The Vicuna competition was won by the International Vicuna Consortium of Textile Manufactures. Condor Tips, joined by Lono Piana and Agronomo of Italy, submitted the winning bid of one million three hundred thousand dollars, with one million dollars to be funded up front. The financial terms for one year’s harvest of fleece (2,000 kilo grams) included the following elements:

2,000 kilo grams of fleece	\$ 600,000
Administration	\$ 30,000
Minimum guaranteed royalties, 10% for uncut cloth and 5% for finished products	\$ 440,000
Vicuna Conservation Management Plan	\$ 150,000
Cloth previously manufactured for trials	<u>\$ 80,000</u>
TOTAL	\$1,300,000

Now all that remained was ratification by the Vicuna Breeders Association at the upcoming National Congress of Vicuna and Camelid Producers to be held June of 1995 in Puquio.

Alonso Burgos worked for four years on behalf of Grupo Inca to engineer the winning bid in the Vicuna competition. As he stood in the Puquio village square, flanked by flower beds full of red geraniums and bright blue benches full of people from around the world, he observed, "You could travel throughout Peru year after year and not find an event similar to this convention. Look around you -- the poorest compensinos have traveled thousands of miles to negotiate with the most influential of our society, everyone celebrating the Vicuna."

At the last minute, the Vicuna Breeders Society demanded changes to the contract. They wanted the right to provide the labor to dehair the fleece from their communities. Late into the night Alonso, Francois, the Italian's lawyer, and Martinez labored to renegotiate the contract.

Finally, the agreement, which contains the hopes and dreams of many people, was voted on and accepted by participants at the National Congress.

The genius of the Vicuna deal lies in the portions set aside for management and administration. The Indian communities now have the financial means and the motive to combat poachers. They have rapidly armed themselves in order to protect their newly productive resource. Poachers, once ignored, are now a target.

The current contract, which extends another five years, calls for the production of 2,000 kilograms of fleece annually. Approximately 9,000 Vicuna will be shorn, making each one of them worth about \$144 annually to the compensinos. A significant sum of money in the high sierra, but not much in the world of high fashion.

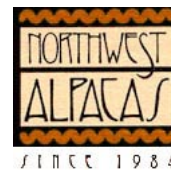
Vicuna will never be a major profit center for Condor Tips or the Italian textile firms. A Vicuna fleece weighs about 220 grams, or less than one-half pound. It takes one person a week to dehair the fleece. Once it is washed, there are only a few ounces left. The total annual production of cloth will probably not exceed 2,000 square meters. Enough to fashion a few wonderful coats, shawls, and scarfs. The ultimate value of the contract to the International Vicuna consortium lies in the luxurious image of being the sole source of the world's rarest fiber.

The Vicuna and her keepers are the true beneficiaries of this unique plan for ecological sanity. If the Society of Vicuna Breeders maintains its solidarity, purges the poachers, and continues on the path set for them by Grupo Inca and the lawyer from Puquio, the Vicuna will have finally found a way to co-exist with humans and securely multiply.

Today the Vicuna standing just a few feet from her traditional enemy, man, will be shorn and released unharmed. The Chacu is underway and the Quecha ancestors of the Inca are chanting, Viva Vicuna, Viva El Presidente, and Viva El Chacu.

### VIVA VICUNA!

The Vicuna occupies a mystical place in the soul of Peru. Its image graces the Peruvian coin and the Vicuna is the national symbol. In ancient times, the Indians of the sierra rubbed their newborn with bone marrow from the fleet Vicuna, hoping their children would run fast and far, and fat from the Vicuna was rubbed on expectant mothers' bellies to bless the unborn child.



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Today the Vicuna has brought the Italians from the halfway around the world and caused them to deposit cash into the coffers of the small Andean communities. The Vicuna has created for the villages and their leaders a link to the outside world. Television cameras are everywhere, light bulbs flash, and for a fleeting moment the Vicuna has provided her keepers with an international stage. Viva Vicuna!

### VIVA EL PRESIDENTE!

The Inca Sun Kings presided over the chacu at the height of the Vicunas' glory. At today's Chacu, El Presidente, Alberto Fuji Mori, has his day in the sun. As Indians, dressed in ancient Incan costume, carried the Royal Throne down the ridge that surrounds Pampa Galeras, Fuji Mori arrived in his helicopter to assume command.

He told the huge crowds that the chacu was possible because they were free -- free from the deadly Shining Path terrorists, which Fuji had subdued, and free from bureaucracy. Fuji had passed a decree granting not only the Vicuna fleece production to the villages, but actually giving them the Vicuna. He read a new law which dictated the same punishment, fifteen years, for a poacher as for a terrorist. In a Peruvian prison, this is a life sentence. As the Indians cheered, Fuji sheared a Vicuna, performed the Vicuna marriage ceremony, and had his cheeks smeared with blood from the Vicuna's ear.

As a politician, he understands that 70% of Peruvians are Indians. As an economist, he understands the importance of a few million dollars funneled into one of the poorest regions of South America. As a conservationist, he has done immeasurable good for the Vicuna. As he mounts the Royal Throne, carried on the backs of the compensinos, he has become, for a moment, a modern day Sun King.

### VIVA EL CHACU!

The Indians, the Italians, and the press all began leaving Poquio as dawn crept over the hill, warming the path to Pampa Galeras. The International Vicuna Conference is over, the speeches are given, and the contracts signed. The moment has come -- El Chacu will soon begin.

The reserve at Pampa Galeras, once home to Dr. Bill Franklin's research, was burnt to the ground by the Shining Path guerrillas. German conservationists have come and gone. But, the Vicuna have survived, their numbers up twenty fold since 1965.

Today, the complex is rebuilt and teeming with compensinos from around Peru. A museum dedicated to the Vicuna is being completed. New fences are everywhere, built to form the capture pens of this modern day Chacu.

The Indians' faces are alive. Banners identify communities from Puno, Macusani, and Cusco. Thousands of men, women, and children are organizing to form the human wall that will encircle the Vicuna. The military is futilely attempting to control the crowds, but nothing can stop the surge into the hills by a people intent on capturing their birthright.

The ridge overlooking Pampa Galeras is punctuated by a line of men. The Vicuna are running out front, relying on their speed to rid themselves of their pursuers. Fifty, then a hundred Vicuna race for the valley's end, a human wall forming at their rear. The herd grows to five hundred by the time they enter the fenced corral.

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Escape routes are sealed off with black netting. The Vicuna are herded into ever smaller catch pens, finally standing only a few feet away from their pursuers, trapped, trying to understand their fate.

Men catch two cria and the Vicuna marriage ceremony begins. These rituals are followed by speeches, and then by shearing. Few, if any, animals are harmed. Once caught and confined, the Vicuna become almost still, their huge eyes calculating every opportunity for escape, realizing there is none.

Once shorn, they are tagged, counted, and released. Their absence of hair becoming a shield against the poachers, because, as Fernando Corzo said, “a shorn Vicuna is of no value to the poacher.” Viva El Chacu!

What will the future bring Vicuna families roaming the Alta Plano of Peru? Dr. Bill Franklin is cautiously optimistic as he reflects on the week’s events. He worries about the politics of keeping over 300 Indian villages united, but says, “I’m impressed that these textile firms are spending such significant sums of money and insisting that the Indians are the direct recipients. Maybe with enough money funnelled into Vicuna management and protection, they will succeed. I certainly hope so.”

Mother Nature seems to be winning for the moment. Alfonso Martinez is lawyering hard on her behalf, Fuji Mori heeds her call, and the Quecha Indians have known and respected her command for thousands of years. The Italians, in the form of Lono Piana and Agronomo, are acting as her bankers. The plan, originally conceived by Grupo Inca, is sound; shear them to save them and with any luck an ever-growing population of Vicuna cria will prosper. VIVA VICUNA!