



Commentary: Controversies and Common Ground in Wild and Domestic Fine Fiber Production in Argentina

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A Commentary on

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South American Camelids (SACs) make several material and non-material contributions to people and are a key component of the Andean biocultural heritage (Vilá and Arzamendia, 2020). As emblematic animals of the Puna or Altiplano ecosystem, SACs are part of one of the most long-lived and culturally distinctive socio-ecological systems in the world: Andean pastoralism. Although as wild camelids vicuñas could be integrated to the Andean socio-ecological productive system as a source of highly-valued fiber via *chakus*, a traditional capture, shearing and release (CSR) system, the main livelihood in the area today is livestock pastoralism, mainly llamas and sheep.

As an interdisciplinary research group focused on Andean biodiversity, culture, history, and current eco-social issues, *Vicuñas, Camélidos y Ambiente* (VICAM) has a profound interest in Andean pastoralism and the relationship between local communities and endemic wildlife. One of the main objectives of our work is to promote effective actions to conserve and sustainably manage Andean biodiversity, including the well-being of IPLC (indigenous peoples and local communities). VICAM's theoretical and ethical standpoint is one that emphasizes intercultural dialogue and the need to respect and consider local views and voices when planning and executing sustainable development projects (Wawrzyk and Vilá, 2013; Vilá, 2015, 2018; Vilá and Arzamendia, 2016; Tartaglia Gamarra and Vilá, 2021) a perspective that we believe has been misrepresented in the article by von Thungen et al. (2021).

The paper describes three case studies, one of which is the development of projects to facilitate the sustainable harvest and use of vicuña fiber in the province of Jujuy. As described in the paper:

“Argentina drove a captive breeding program in 1960 at the Experimental Station of Abra Pampa (Jujuy). The aim was to offer productive alternatives to the local communities. This experience was later multiplied in private farms inside and outside vicuña distribution range and was contested by *Vicuña Camelidos y Ambiente* group (VICAM) (Vilá, 2002; Vilá and Lichtenstein, 2006)”.

This paragraph provides no context to understand why researchers were opposed to captive breeding projects, and portrays this position as particular to VICAM. While it is true that both

Lichtenstein and other colleagues have argued against captive breeding of vicugna, the literature cited in this paper was not endorsed by VICAM, since VICAM was created in 2007.

Moreover, Lichtenstein has never been a member of VICAM's team, and she independently authored a book chapter on captive breeding focusing on the beneficiaries (ranch owners), their attitude toward the conservation of wild vicuñas, the population and welfare of the captive vicuñas, and the relationship between investment and fiber prices (profitability). The author concluded that management in captivity was not an adequate approach for the conservation of vicuñas (Lichtenstein, 2006).

Moreover, these issues were even recognized by INTA -the institution to which the authors of this commented article (von Thungen et al., 2021) are affiliated- in a letter addressed to the Provincial Authorities of Jujuy (attached to this commentary). In this letter, INTA stated that the vicugna captive breeding projects were discontinued in 2005 based on "the evaluation of these experiences" and the fact that they did not "fully meet sustainability criteria" (Arzamendia et al., 2012). The management of this vicugna captive breeding station was so irregular that in 2004, the director was removed from his position and was subject to administrative inquiry by INTA. Thus, this is not a "controversy" *per se*, but rather a lesson learned from the implementation of a specific vicugna ranching management strategy.

The paper references VICAM again in the following paragraph:

"The CSR experiences in the province of Jujuy started in 2003. Initially, VICAM researchers developed a top-down experience. The project emphasized teaching adequate procedures to private producers of the Puna, belonging to an Association Cieneguillas (2003–2005) and Santa Catalina Cooperative (2012, 2014) (Bonacic and Gimpel, 2003; Vilá et al., 2010). Initially the project and later reports showed that the conceptual framework was conceived as a top-down experience. The aim of the project was to teach the interested groups how to conduct the CSR activities".

The characterization of CSR experiences involving VICAM as "top-down" is simply not true. Current members of VICAM developed the first *chaku* in Argentina in 2003 as a response to an invitation from "Los Pioneros Asociación de Cieneguillas," a local llama and sheep herders group who expressed concern about what they perceived to be an excessive quantity of vicuñas—for which they had no use—grazing in their lands. The challenge at the time (2001) was to engage the local community and transform this "problem" into an opportunity to promote the sustainable use and conservation of wild vicuñas (Vilá et al., 2020). A few years later, the "Agro Livestock Breeding Cooperative of Santa Catalina" (COOPASAC) also contacted VICAM researchers to request technical support and collaboration to sustainably manage the wild vicugna populations in their lands, as can be observed in the additional video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_A_rnEgHzo&t=86s) (2014) presented. Detailed descriptions of these experiences have been published (Vilá et al., 2010, 2020a,b; Arzamendia and Vilá, 2012; Arzamendia et al., 2014; Vilá and Arzamendia, 2020).

The capacity building events conducted in the framework of these projects were open to the community, to aboriginal

associations, to the members of local schools and included students from the public university.

VICAM has been an advocate of intercultural and dialogic approaches to wildlife conservation from the start. We have emphasized the need to develop sustainable use projects from a multiple valuation framework, including the integration of local perspectives and symbolic values placed on nature elements (Vilá, 2014, 2015; Vilá et al., 2020; Wawrzyk and Vilá, 2013). As described in Vilá and Arzamendia (2020), "*Data [...] were obtained from the vicugna management plan of Santa Catalina, a joint project between the VICAM research group (technical manager) and the COOPASAC (local manager) that began in 2011. The management plan involves diverse stakeholders, including representatives of IPLCs [indigenous peoples and local communities], the local school communities, interdisciplinary researchers and university students. To date, we have held over 20 meetings with local communities and COOPASAC, contributing to build capacities among locals (approximately 200 people) and training over 150 students. [...] The fluent dialogue between our different knowledge systems was key to conduct successful chakus [CSR projects]*". VICAM has gained international recognition for these and other activities that are open to all community members, such as our environmental education programs (Vilá et al., 2009, 2020b; Vilá and Arzamendia, 2016). Similarly, some activities were carried out in response to explicit requests by local communities, such as the development of an environmental calendar representing periods and yearly events of agricultural, social and symbolic significance (Vilá and Arzamendia, 2016). As we hope is made clear by these publications, the claim that VICAMs work with local communities follows a top-down approach has no base in reality.

There are two ideas underlying these two extracts. The first is expressed in Table 1 of the commented publication (von Thungen et al., 2021) in, where the "differences in common ground" among stakeholders are listed. According to this, researchers have an "overvaluation of science as a producer of knowledge." We take this as meaning that researchers do not consider the practical experiences of local people as a valid source of knowledge. The second idea is that CONICET researchers and INTA technical staff have conflicting research objectives and project goals, particularly in regard to rural communities, their role in CSR projects and benefits they can derive from these projects. These ideas are further developed in sections such as:

"Neighboring rural livelihoods in Jujuy demanded to develop their own CSR understandings in line with their traditional knowledge. This was answered by a group of researchers from INTA and local government officials, who from the start used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which incorporated community empirical knowledge of rural livelihoods. This resulted in a bottom-up collective construction of understanding, which was highly valued as "it meant working together".

As we have described above, VICAM has been one of the main promoters of bottom-up, intercultural approaches, championing the sustainable use of vicugna fiber via CSR projects rooted in traditional Andean practices (*chakus*, Vilá and Arzamendia, 2020; Vilá et al., 2020a) as a way to facilitate the conservation of this

wild species while simultaneously promoting local development. The involvement of local communities in all stages of the project has been an essential part of these initiatives. VICAM has even authored a handbook for local communities and formal guidelines for the conservation and sustainable use of vicuñas in Jujuy (Arzamendia et al., 2012; Baldo et al., 2013) where this approach is systematized and can be freely accessed online.

In sum, in our opinion and at least in the case of vicuñas in Jujuy, the characterization of VICAM and CONICET CSR projects in this article is widely inaccurate and misleading, thus affecting the CONICET and VICAM's credibility as socially-responsible academic organizations. The success of our collaboration with local communities is strongly dependent on the mutual trust built after many years of working in the field, a trust that is based, among other things, on VICAM's bottom-up, evidence-based approach to conservation and management, which is particularly important when diverse interests are at stake.

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