

La Estrella de Arica

Arica, Chile

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Following the trail of the enigmatic Andean cat

The carnivorous species endemic to the altiplano of Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile is found in danger of extinction. Specialists of South America and the United States defined a plan of action in order to preserve it.

A single tattoo of two small feline tracks adorns the right arm of investigator Jim Sanderson, who explains with pride that the drawing on his skin reflects his commitment to the conservation of the Andean cat (*Oreailurus Jacobita*). The biologist who in 1998 at Salar de Surire had the privilege of filming the slippery carnivore which is in danger of extinction and of which only four known photographs have been taken worldwide, participated next to twelve scientists in a meeting of the Alliance of the Andean Cat (AGA) that was held a few days ago in our city and that defined a plan of action to preserve the species that is endemic to Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina.

The Andean cat inhabits zones over 3,800 meters above sea level. It is a small, but robust feline of an average length of 92 centimeters for the male and 63 centimeters for the female. It has fur with irregular markings with areas of coffee/orange coloring that extend from its neck to both sides of its back, and dark circular markings on its cheeks and frontal extremities. The rest of the body is beige. The tail is very large and has about seven to nine rings, gray in appearance, separated by a central line of coffee color. This characteristic differentiates it from the colocolo (pampas cat or *Lynchailurus colocolo*), that also inhabits the high zones, but has a short tail and a smaller size.

"Many people of the altiplano of the First Region tell us that 50 years ago there was a greater number, then began a sustained and drastic decline in the number of the population. We want to establish the cause of this gradual drop. The lack of food seems a doubtful element, because in the altiplano there is a large quantity of vizcachas and rodents", presented the biologist, Agustín Iriarte Walton, of Servicio Agrícola y Ganadero (SAG), who is also the representative in Chile of AGA.

SURVEY

To the photograph of Sanderson one can add the visual sightings of the Bolivian biologist, Lilian Villalba (who made several observations of the animal in an area south of Potosí), eighty skins (both Andean cat and colocolo) and five skulls for study. And there are no major references, except for those given by the locals of the altiplano and the park rangers that have sighted a feline. It is for this reason that, during the reunion, it was agreed to implement a plan of action for the next five years that will include in its first three years a survey to determine the number of this species that live in the northeast of Chile, the south of Peru and the western part of Argentina and Bolivia.

The program will have an investment of \$500,000 assured Iriarte; financing delivered mainly by the institutions Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN), British Petroleum, and the National Geographic Society (NGS).

"We must determine the level of the population density and its distribution, to see if in Chile there really are samples in the First, Second and Third regions, and to try to capture a cat (to date has never been done) in order to fit it with a 'radio-collar' (technology to establish the position of the animal), which is very difficult, and to see its ecology. We want to know what it eats and how it interacts with the pumas, foxes and other felines. We will apply a revolutionary technology seldom utilized in the world, namely collect the feces of all the carnivores in the area and analyze it at the individual level of a population -for example-, at General Lagos. We are going to know how many pumas there are, how many Andean cats, colocolo and foxes. Through the hairs in these feces, we are going to study whether the pumas are eating the Andean cat or if the foxes feed on it; we will analyze the genetics from the sample", Iriarte explained.

TIME LIMIT

The species survey through the feces will be carried out in the First Region at Salar de Surire in the Vicunas National Reserve, at Dona Ines de Collahuasi and at Salar del Huasco (in the interior of Iquique), and in the community of General Lagos.

"We have a time limit of three years to determine the presence or absence of the animal; in a second phase we should capture it and do studies of ecology in the two subsequent years", informed Iriarte.

It was presented that there is a need to create a conscience on the importance of the conservation of the Andean cat, mainly among the students and the Aymara community. In the past the locals hunted the Andean cat, or the "titi" - as it is called in the altiplano - to utilize the body of the animal in religious rituals where the fertility of the livestock was asked for.

This last element opens the doors for the reflection and questioning of conservationist and investigator, Jim Sanderson. "We need to protect this species that is not harmful to nor has any fear of humans. Why then do the local people kill an animal to use it in the religious and traditional ceremonies? More than photos, it would please me to capture a living member of this species to be able to study it. In the world there are many more species of small cats (20 species) than of large cats (16 species), and a great deal of those small cats have never been studied. This plan of action is going to serve as a catalyst to extend the investigation", he predicted.

Daniel Meza