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Rare and Endangered Andean Cat Killed

La Paz, Bolivia, June 8, 2005 - The only Andean cat ever fitted with a radio collar was found dead April 25th in the southwestern highlands of Bolivia. The tragic news came to the Wildlife Conservation Network from Lilian Villalba, coordinator for Alianza Gato Andino (AGA) or the Andean Cat Alliance. She and a small team of scientists had trapped and been following the cat they named Sombrita for ten months before it was killed for unknown reasons. Evidence at the site suggested that the cat's leg had been caught in a jaw trap, a hunting method commonly used by poachers, however the cat had not been skinned. The radio collar had also been removed and replaced backwards which further fueled the mystery. Ms. Villalba and her team are continuing the investigation into Sombrita's death.

The Andean cat (*Oreailurus jacobita*) is one of the least known felines in the world and is considered the most endangered cat species in the Americas. Very little is known about this small carnivore that lives exclusively in the remote high-altitude deserts of the Andes in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru. There are no Andean cats in captivity and Sombrita was the first cat to be captured and fitted with a radio collar. Radio telemetry data is crucial in the study and conservation of this rare species.

Dr. Jim Sanderson, one of the world's foremost experts on small cats, was one of the team of scientists that radio collared Sombrita in April 2004. He is convinced that there is no correlation between radio collaring and an increased chance of poaching. In 1998, Dr. Sanderson spent three months in Chile searching for the elusive Andean cat before finally meeting face-to-face with the subject of his study. His landmark photographs and videotape launched local and international interest in the cat and the beginnings of the Andean cat conservation effort.

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