When an angry farmer gripping a shotgun yells, you listen. Jorge had lost his temper, but conservationists from Andean Cat Alliance (Alianza Gato Andino - AGA) were accustomed to working with upset farmers; they protect endangered Andean cats in “high conflict” zones where farmers typically loathe wild cats and try to eliminate them. There are less than 3,000 Andean cats in the world and saving them hinges on farmers’ support; so, when farmers yell, AGA pays attention and makes their concerns a priority. This is how they started working with Jorge.

Jorge’s farm is in Coquimbo, a narrow region of northwestern Chile where the Andes run closest to the sea. In just one year, he lost 100 goats—a sizable portion of his livelihood—to a series of mountain lion attacks. Jorge was angry with conservationists for protecting animals that could make a meal of his goats. That was three years ago, today he is the first farmer to participate in AGA’s livestock guarding dog program in Chile.

Just a bit heavier than a housecat, an Andean cat is far too small to kill a goat. They eat mostly viscacha, rather adorable bunny-like rodents. However, when bigger predators, like mountain lions, attack livestock then farmers seek retaliation against any carnivore they find; Andean cats are killed regardless of their guiltlessness. So, an important way to protect Andean cats is to help farmers safeguard their livestock from larger carnivores. When they can use trained dogs to protect their livestock, farmers no longer target Andean cats—this is how Jorge changed from adversary to pro-conservation participant in AGA’s livestock guarding program.

As Jorge and other farmers became involved, AGA had to then obtain a suitable breed of dogs for their program. Anatolian shepherds have excellent features and temperament for guarding, but are essentially nonexistent in Chile. Luckily, while studying for his Ph.D. in the U.S., AGA member Rodrigo Villalobos located a breeder with puppies in Oregon. Amongst the litter, Rodrigo found one who stood out as especially bright and affectionate, the perfect dog for Jorge. Though she was born thousands of miles from Chile, AGA fittingly named her “Andean”—Andean is now learning to guard goats on Jorge’s farm.

The human-wildlife conflict that AGA is addressing through their livestock guarding dog program is a major threat to wildlife around the world. WCN partners Cheetah Conservation Botswana (CCB) and Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) in Namibia have successfully solved conflicts between cheetahs and farmers for years through similar programs, so Rodrigo plans to visit CCB and CCF this spring to learn from their expertise. Through this cross collaboration, Rodrigo can take knowledge from Africa and adapt it to the Andes, ensuring AGA keeps livestock secure, farmers happy, and Andean cats thriving.
Have Saigas Found a New Path?

Dusk is approaching. In less than an hour, the vast Ustyurt Plateau, situated between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, will be plunged into darkness and impossible to navigate through the thick snow and -20-degree temperature. Hamza, a 35-year-old conservationist working for the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA), focuses his binoculars on the horizon one last time, hoping to spot saiga antelope in the dwindling sunlight. Despite being an expert tracker with extensive experience searching for saigas in this immense landscape, he comes up short.

Hamza and his colleagues from SCA have spent the past week surveying the traditional migration routes of the Ustyurt saigas via motorbike. So far, they had only come across a few saiga footprints. This was strange since saiga populations in this area were doing well and had not been affected by the disease outbreak that devastated other saiga populations last year.

That night, the team reviewed their notes from the survey, also called a transect census, and were left with one question: where are the saigas?

As far back as the ice age, tens of thousands of saiga antelopes roamed across eastern Europe, Asia, and Alaska. In the 1990s, the Ustyurt saiga population was bigger than all other saiga groups, numbering 265,000. Unfortunately, in the past 25 years, the overall saiga population has dropped by 95% due to poaching and disease, and the number of saigas in Ustyurt plummeted by 99.5%.

Despite the drastic decline of the Ustyurt saigas, things began looking up for them in 2016; census results revealed they were rebounding. Hamza and the SCA team believed this was due to reduced poaching and the opening of migration corridors along the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan border fence. While the fence remained, 125 openings or “corridors” were created along its length, allowing saigas to once again move between both countries for feeding, breeding, and birthing. Over the past year, SCA also worked with anti-poaching rangers to protect saigas in the Saigachy Reserve, the largest protected area in Uzbekistan.

If reduced poaching and adding corridors created a saiga population increase in 2016, why couldn’t Hamza find any now? Saiga Conservation Alliance thinks saigas may have simply found new migration routes that have yet to be located. Locals from nearby villages have seen saigas moving through other, more isolated parts of the region that deviated from their usual migrating routes. So, it’s possible that saigas are forging new, safer paths away from humans.

Hamza and the others returned to SCA headquarters early the next morning, eager to share their thoughts with their team and to start getting to the bottom of this mystery.
Dark storm clouds start gathering across the sky as Felix, a senior field assistant at Proyecto Tití, glances impatiently at his watch. Soon it will be pouring rain, turning Colombia’s 1,000-acre Ceibal National Forest into quicksand. Felix is eager to get back indoors before that happens. He looks up and follows the movements of a female cotton-top tamarin sitting on a branch of a fruit tree. Felix is keeping his eye on her, hoping to collect a sample of her poop. Eventually his patience pays off and he heads back to the field station with a sample in hand, making it inside just before the rain hits.

Across continents, Jane Horgan of Cheetah Conservation Botswana (CCB) has just finished collecting cheetah scat in the Ghanzi farmlands. Jane is relieved to have found this sample so quickly, as finding scat can involve long hours of travel on unforgiving roads in scorching temperatures. The sample is fresh and she found it easily at a tree where cheetahs commonly mark their territory. Armed with bags of scat, she returns to the field office and puts the samples in the freezer, then washes her hands with disinfectant, twice.

Wildlife poop, or scat, while unpleasant to work with is a veritable gold mine of information, and can be incredibly illuminating to scientists. By analyzing hormones in cotton-top poop, conservationists can map out the reproductive cycles of dominant females, like the one Felix was monitoring. Cotton-tops are most fertile when there is plenty of food to eat, which coincides with the rainy season; so more cotton-tops become pregnant when it’s rainy. Without enough rain, food supply decreases and so does cotton-top reproduction. This is why they are so vulnerable to climate fluctuations.

Similarly, by analyzing hair found in cheetah scat, conservationists can determine what they eat, which is especially critical for their conservation. A major threat to cheetahs is retaliatory killing from farmers as cheetahs are often mistakenly blamed for attacking livestock. Being able to prove cheetahs are not eating livestock by analyzing their scat can help mitigate human-wildlife conflict. For instance, after recently analyzing scat collected from cheetahs in the Ghanzi farmlands, CCB found that only 6% of their diet was comprised of livestock. They were able to share this information with local farmers, thus de-escalating tensions.

Both Felix and Jane will use fecal analysis to make the best conservation decisions to help endangered cheetahs and cotton-tops. Both Felix and Jane will use fecal analysis to make the best conservation decisions to help endangered cheetahs and cotton-tops. It may not be the most glamorous or enviable part of conservation fieldwork, but it’s essential for protecting wildlife.
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