

Annual Report

July 2022 / June 2023





Our **vision** is to conserve Andean cat populations and protect their habitat throughout their range, across Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Perú, and to promote peaceful coexistence between them and native communities.

The **Andean Cat** is the most endangered wild cat of the American continent. Fewer than 1,400 adult Andean cats are estimated to roam the vast, arid landscape of the high Andes and northern Patagonia. This little-known species is threatened mainly by habitat loss and degradation caused by extractive industries, such as gold mining and oil extraction. Andean cats are also hunted by herders because they are perceived as threats to their livestock. Given their low numbers, the loss of even a single individual can drive a local population to extinction, so our work is focused on reducing those losses by actively engaging local communities in the conservation of these endangered cats.



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Working in conservation can be seen as a long train journey—it has a starting point, but you never know where the final destination will be. Uncertainty is always present, but it doesn't matter when the goal is clear and you are sure the ride is worth it. During this journey, we meet people. Some jump enthusiastically on the train, while others stay behind, but all of them nourish and strengthen our mission. Each stone we encounter on the track, or any unexpected detour that makes the trip longer, only serves to teach us and test our commitment. There are times where everything goes smoothly, and we may even find resting places to stretch our legs. These opportunities act as fueling stations that help us move forward, saving Andean cats one at a time. We traveled through the high mountain peaks where the Andean cat lives, through crooked tracks that sometimes seem to take us backwards before moving forward. In the process of learning more of what the mysterious Andean cat needs to survive, we had to change directions several times, but we still pursue the same goal.

The Andean Cat Alliance (AGA) started its journey 23 years ago. During this time, we learned important lessons. The first is that you have to keep on moving if you want things to change, and this movement may lead to new paths and projects. The second is that you can help others on the way, or you may need help and need to rely on your safety network. The third lesson is that you need travel companions that can carry their weight. These companions are not just observers, they share the same commitment and strongly believe in the same goal.

These words are for you, because if you are reading this, you are one of those invaluable trip partners who believe that the Andean cat and its ecosystem can be saved. Thanks for joining us on this conservation journey. We couldn't ask for better company on our mission to protect Andean cats!

*Rocio Palacios - Executive Director
and Cintia Tellaeche Program Director.*



Ayni

In Andean communities, the ancestral concept of Ayni is part of their cosmovision. Put simply, Ayni refers to reciprocity—I have your back today, you have mine tomorrow. But it is more generous than that. It could be better understood as, I see you need help today and I will do what I can to provide, and when I'm in need, I know that I will be taken care of. Ayni creates good relations and brings prosperity to all, and is deeply embedded in the

Andean culture.

As part of our CATCrafts program, communities decided to extend this Ayni towards Andean cats, investing 15% of the profits made from sales of their products to Andean cat conservation. This year, the Pucapaqocha artisan association of Peru invested their conservation funds in placing camera traps that will allow them to monitor the Andean cat population near their community.

Breaking barriers, first ecotourism experience with CATcrafts

The NGO Birds Chile joined forces with AGA to conduct a novel eco-tourism experience focused on communities that are involved in CATCrafts. Gonzalo Cruz, the Chilean field officer, delivered an engaging talk to the tourists, highlighting the importance of conserving Andean cats and their

ecosystem. The tourists also visited a local community and learned how they're involved in conservation practices. The experience gave the tourists valuable insights into the enigmatic Andean cat, and each participant gave a gift to Andean cat conservation.

Dancing with the cat and the vicuñas

To mark AGA's 20th anniversary in 2019, we organized the inaugural Andean Cat and Vicuña Festival. The vicuña, an endangered native herbivore from the camel family, is vital to native Andean communities for its traditional sustainable wool harvesting. As soon as pandemic restrictions

were lifted at the end of 2022, the community of Lagunillas del Farallón in northern Argentina made this festival an annual tradition. The 2022 festival was exciting, with activities designed by local children, music, and dancing until sunrise. We felt privileged to be a part of it!



Long postponed hugs

AGA members historically meet in person every three years. These workshop meetings have been the foundations of most relevant advances in Andean cat conservation. From the development of the action plan to the review of the status of the species, these complex processes are always better done in person.

In September 2022, we were finally able to meet in person in Malargüe, Argentina, after five years since our last meeting. Long postponed hugs were given and received. During the first two

days, we attended a training on human dimensions in wildlife management' held by Alistair Bath and Monica Engel. We spent the remaining days reviewing our mission and started designing the new strategic plan. The most important outcome of this meeting was reconnecting with likeminded people that share our passion and unwavering commitment to conservation, which transcends borders and obstacles. Together, we can focus on our goals and direct our efforts to make meaningful impacts in Andean cat conservation.



Hope that emerges in extreme ecosystems

In diverse and challenging habitats, life not only survives, but thrives. Young ones are the best example. They are born in these harsh environments and spend their time playing joyfully, making the best of things. In the mountain range of Santiago de Chile, a resident Andean cat gave birth for the second year in a row to a playful little one. Bernardo Segura (leader of the project Andean cat monitoring in the Santiago mountain range), happily shared videos of this new kitten playing with its mother not far from Chile's biggest

city. On the other side of the country, an Andean cat kitten appeared on camera in Puritama Reserve, a private protected area that belongs to our ally Explora. After 10 years of monitoring, this is the first young cat ever recorded, which suggests that conservation efforts have been successful. Beyond their cuteness, kittens are relevant because they are living proof that Andean cat populations are breeding, and for a population to be able to breed, they need good food sources, access to shelter, and few threats.



Over the years, Andean cat kittens have brought us hope, and they are represented in our organization's logo, with the mother protecting her young. Working together with communities, other NGOs, conservation-friendly companies, and supporters like you, we want to believe that we are the embracing mountain that appears behind them both in our logo, providing support and nurturing the remaining populations. Every individual counts in the fight against extinction.



! Did you know?

**Andean cats only have
*one kitten per year!***

Setting precedent in Argentina: Andean cat as a Natural Monument in Jujuy province.

The Andean cat is recognized as endangered by the IUCN and has threatened status in all four countries where it is found: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru. While this recognition is helpful for conservation, it does not translate to relevance among local people. In Argentina, even when a local population of Andean cats is critically endangered, there are no clear conservation policies to protect this species.

Jujuy province, in the northwestern corner of Argentina, is making a difference. In September

2022, the Andean cat was declared a Provincial Natural Monument by Law Nº6268. Locally, this means that the province will design specific policies to protect the cats, which may be a gamechanger for their long-term conservation. AGA assisted the government during this whole process and are closely working with them to develop a specific action plan. We are also encouraging other provinces to replicate the concept, and will continue developing institutional relationships to protect the vast environment of the High Andes, its wildlife, and the Andean cat.



Two decades in secret: the enigma of the Andean cats in Tunari National Park.

In Tunari National Park, Bolivia, Nuria Bernal and Lilian Villalba obtained the first evidence of Andean cats in 1999. That first encounter started a mystery. Extensive efforts to search for more clues about the cats along this entire mountain range turned up empty. No more signs appeared until 2015, when Juan Carlos Huaranca found an Andean cat skin in the hands of a local herder. It was unclear when the skin was obtained, but it renewed our hope that the cats could still be found there. This population, if present, would mark the easternmost limit of the species' geographic distribution, and would highlight the relevance of this protected area. Tunari National Park is an area of remarkable beauty, but there are several concerning threats that hang over it, such as forest fires, grassland burning, and traditional hunting.

Over the years, the Andean cats in the park seemed to play hide-and-seek with the researchers. With their elusive behavior, the cats stayed away from humans, vanishing into the mountain peaks. As the years passed, advances in the quality and accessibility of modern technologies made a difference. At the beginning of 2023, with the 24/7 camera traps program, at least three different Andean cats were recorded on the peaks that skim the skies 13,500 feet above sea level. Our report to the protected area managers, confirming the presence of the cats in the area, was an initial step to develop conservation activities for this fragile habitat.





The genetic journey

The Andean Cat Global Genetics Program has four objectives. The first is to complete assessment of the species distribution across its range, filling in any gaps in the map. The second objective is to identify Conservation Units—demographically independent populations that may deserve special protection—across that range. The third is to assess connectivity among individual populations, and the fourth is to identify potential small, isolated populations that have a higher extinction risk and should be prioritized for conservation. All of these objectives serve our ultimate goal: to be able to make informed decisions and focus on key Andean cat populations in the most urgent need of protection.

AGA members and trained local allies are collecting non-invasive samples from Andean cats across diverse areas spanning the four range countries. These samples are mainly collected in Andean cat scat, but also include the carcasses of cats unfortunately killed by road traffic and portions of skin obtained from pelts in Andean communities.

Although the collection of scats in the field provides the largest number of samples, it is still a challenge considering that only about 9% of them actually belong to Andean cats. The rest

may come from pampas cats, culpeo foxes, or even Geoffroy's cats, which are all more commonly found in this ecosystem. So far, after collecting and analyzing over 160 fecal samples, we have definitively recorded 15 samples from Andean cats. These samples were identified using three mitochondrial genes, 18 microsatellite loci, and two sexual loci.

Our preliminary results show two genetically distinct Conservation Units across the range, reflecting gene flow between them and a potential area of contact in Central Chile. However, it is essential to note that these results could change when the first complete Andean cat genome is sequenced, thanks to a collaboration with Dr. Eduardo Eizirik and Jonas Lescroart, a Ph.D. student from the University of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. Besides being an important scientific achievement, this material provides excellent genetic resolution to assess population connectivity and identify Conservation Units throughout the Andean cat range. We are now working on collecting more samples from the four range countries and submitting them for analysis. Using all this combined genetic information, we are confident that we will be able to design conservation strategies for the long-term survival of the Andean cat.



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*Acknowledgements:*  
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We are very grateful for the valuable support of the Jon Ayers Foundation to this program.

Weaving Andean culture and conservation

In the past, great empires with complex cultures thrived where the Andean cat still roams. Those cultures believed that the Andean cat was sacred, the only creature capable of moving between the world of the living and the realm of the gods. Although those empires are now gone, they have not completely disappeared. Some beliefs and practices remain, and we just need to pay attention to see them. Most of the practices that still exist today are those related to daily activities, such as cooking, making utensils, traditional harvesting, or the fabrication of clothes. Cultural practices such as traditional herding, shearing, and spinning have endured, and one of the goals of the CATcrafts program is

to ensure they continue to live on. When the artisans participate in these practices, they unknowingly provide a window into the past to glimpse this vibrant Andean wisdom in action.

But how can we maximize the impact of these traditional practices? How can we show the world the power of these ancestral techniques, that are sustainable and represent a sensible and positive way to interact with nature?

The answer is to unite people that will carry these traditions into the future. We did the first training of these techniques with 90 tourism students from a technical education institute in Santiago de Chile.



They visited the community of Ayquina, in the Northern part of the country. The experience began with a presentation about the Andean cat, its habitat, conservation threats, and its biocultural relationship with the Andean people. The students were then able to put their "hands in the wool," and guided by the artisans, they received training in needle felting, creating Andean cat figurines.

Finally, the students and artisans went together to the field to see the livestock, and students actively participated in washing the wool, the raw material for the beautiful, handcrafted pieces they had just

created. It was a joyful day where students and artisans shared knowledge, laughter, and ancestry.

We thank SIMBIOSIS Consulting for facilitating this event. We look forward to continue working together.

In the end, we couldn't help but believe that the Andean cat was probably sitting with the gods, telling them the story about how these artisans are keeping the traditions alive. Maybe the cat is even telling them that there is still hope for the realm of the living, because he could see Ayni still being respected and honored.



Follow the new Insta!

Looking for a thrilling way to stay updated on artisanal treasures and Andean cat conservation? Follow @catcrafts.aga on Instagram! Social media presence is crucial to promoting artisanal products and the communal efforts to protect these endangered wildcats. Are you curious about how the products are made? Do you want to know the stories of the artisans? Follow us for this content and more... We promise cat videos! Please share between your friends and family!



Photographic journey through kids' eyes.

Photography is a powerful conservation tool. It portrays specific moments in time, or important behaviors for a given species, which allow us to track changes. Images can also spark reactions and emotions in viewers, which translates into increased sensitivity and love for wildlife. But there is also another aspect of photography: it allows us to represent the world as we see it.

The use of photography in conservation goes beyond research and communication—it can be a powerful education tool. In 2022, while the Education Program was being rebuilt, we started a partnership with LATINPHOTO.org, launching the Niños Reporteros (Kids Reporters) project.

The goal of this project is to develop ecological sensitivity in school children by highlighting the Andean cat's habitat through photos that the kids capture, guided by teachers and trainers. So far, we have developed workshops in the small and isolated school of Lagunillas del Farallon, and provided cameras for them to start capturing their reality. The initial activities have been really promising, and we expect to share some of these images with you soon!





Pawsitive actions

We all love dogs. They provide love and comfort, but can also help in daily duties or provide medical or psychological support. But for dogs to be these loving, safe companions, they need to be properly taken care of. They need to be fed every day, to be sheltered from the elements, and to receive medical checkups and vaccinations every year. Sadly, not every dog in the world has these needs fulfilled. In Andean regions, sometimes dogs are not properly taken care of. They don't receive medical treatments, so they can become sick, and sometimes they are not properly fed, so they have to fend for themselves. Sometimes this leads them to attack livestock and wildlife, like Andean cats.

The Pawsitive Actions Program was created in response to the killing of Andean cats and other animals by neglected domestic dogs. Although direct encounters between Andean cats and dogs may be rare, the presence of domestic animals in wild landscapes creates a disruption—they sometimes consume the native prey of wild predators and can also reduce the



availability of shelter. Dogs also have a high likelihood of transmitting diseases to wildlife, as has been proven by canine distemper for lions and rabies for Ethiopian wolves.

We started this program with local workshops and interviews to understand what the communities needed to properly care for their pets, and to assess their knowledge of responsible pet ownership. The initial results were dire. We recorded the presence of active canine distemper outbreaks and severe parasites infections. We also understood that local communities really don't comprehend or follow the practices of responsible pet ownership.

These results led to immediate action. We organized vaccination campaigns for distemper and rabies and provided deworming treatments.

In Bolivia, we started planning neutering campaigns. In Argentina, plans are underway for a comprehensive vaccination campaign. We also took this as an opportunity to include more wildlife veterinarians in our conservation programs, fostering a deeper connection to wildlife conservation and promoting this specialized field within the veterinary career. So far, Vanessa Ramos, a veterinarian known for her extensive experience providing medical treatment to rural dogs, and two advanced veterinary students, Cintia Coronel and Johanna Mamani, are collaborating in Bolivia. In northern Argentina, we are looking for professors and students at the local University. In northern Patagonia, we are developing a comprehensive and collaborative project in collaboration with Dr. Sophia Di Cataldo, a veterinarian who specializes in wildlife health, to assess the presence of disease in local native carnivores.



From puppy paws to vast territories

In northern Patagonia, Argentina, livestock guarding dogs (LGD) are trained from birth. When they are around ten days old, puppies open their eyes and take their first steps, and for the first few weeks their world is reduced to a modest three feet radius around their mother. But in a marked difference to other puppies, after those first few weeks, LGDs begin to share their space with their future companions and protectees: goats and sheep. These dogs spend four months around livestock, sharing crucial moments and developing long-lasting bonds that will inform their future roles as protectors.

As they grow and start going out to the field with the livestock, the 10 active LGDs play a vital role in the harmonious coexistence between herders and wildlife. Livestock herders in this area are nomadic; they move to higher lands in the summer looking for fresh pastures. Because of

this, the overall surface that these dogs are protecting is quite impressive: about 113,167 acres of land, roughly half the size of the Salton Sea in California. To increase the impact of these dogs, our local partner Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) donated 20 Foxlights to be used in northern Neuquen and southern Mendoza. Because of the ruggedness of the terrain, dogs wouldn't be able to work well in these areas, so the Foxlights will act as predator deterrents and keep livestock safe in their absence.

The testimonies of the herders are really encouraging. Only 20 years ago, this type of program wasn't considered possible in these areas, and today these dogs are changing their lives. LGDs not only boost the family economy but also provide invaluable emotional support, improving people's quality of life and reducing conflict with and retaliatory killings of native carnivores.

Find the five differences Let's play!

Answer:

Nose

Coloration

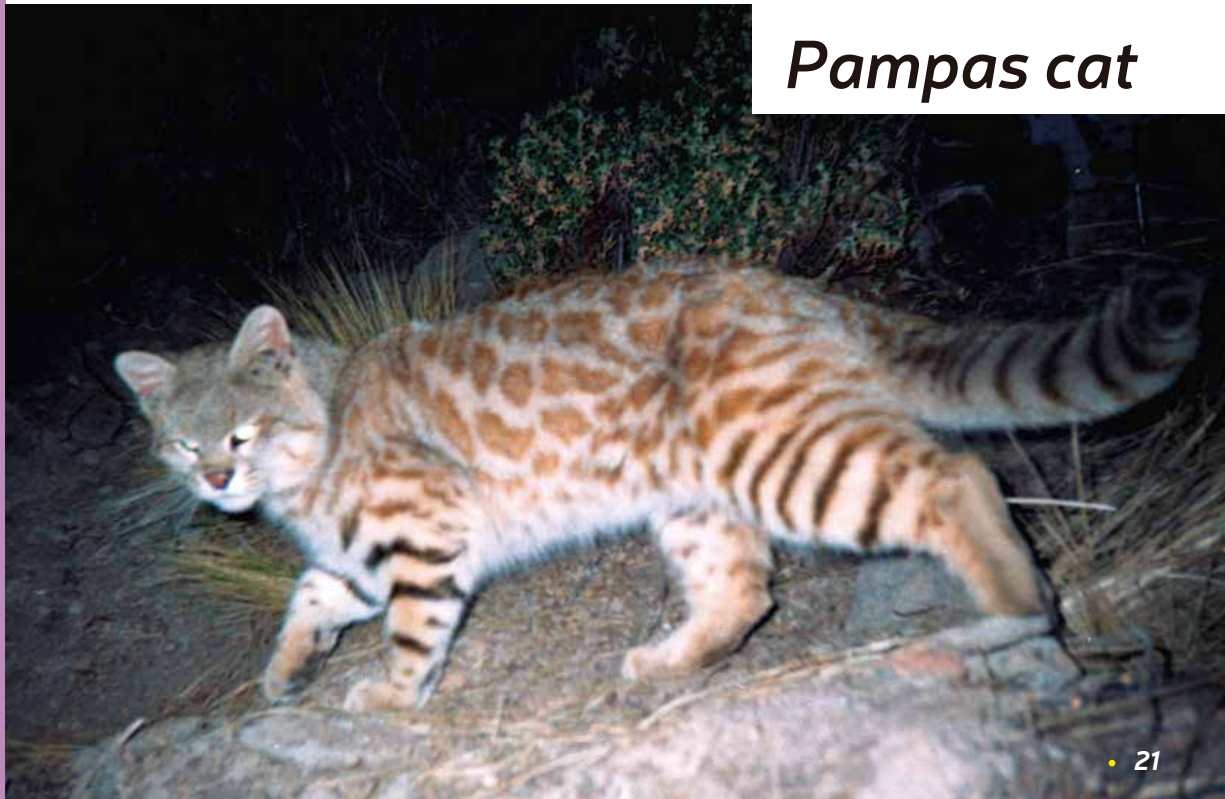
stains

Front paw spots

Tail

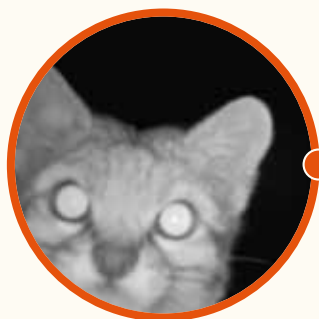


Andean cat



Pampas cat





New cats recorded this period

Conflict mitigation program



CATCrafts



In the field 24/7



Pawsitive actions



Education program



Where we Work



7 + 2 New Andean cats detected



90 Tourism students trained in handcraft process.



+20,000 km traveled in field work.



More than **160** genetic samples analyzed.



113,167 Acres protected by our guard dogs.

Key Persons List Andean Cat Alliance 2022 - 2023

General Coordination

Executive Director: **Rocío Palacios**
Program director: **Cintia Tellaeche**
Administrative director: **Lilian Villalba**
Communications director: **Anthony Pino**

Conflict Mitigation Program

Interim General Coordinator &
Argentinean Field Officer:
Maria Jose Bolgeri
Peruvian Field Officer: **Anthony Pino**

CATcrafts Program

General Coordinator: **Mauro Lucherini**
Argentinean Field Officer: **Cintia Tellaeche**
Chilean Field Officer: **Gonzalo Cruz**
Peruvian Field Officer: **Anthony Pino**

Education Program

Co-Coordinators: **Gabriela Aguirre &
Daniela Ulloa**

24/7 In the field Program

Global Genetics Program
Coordinator: **Constanza Napolitano**
Camera Trapping Program Coordinator:
Juan Reppucci

Chilean Protected Area Project Coordinator:
Cristian Sepulveda

Pawsitive Actions

Coordinator: **Juan Carlos Huaranca**
Argentinean Field Officers:
Cintia Tellaeche & Rocío Palacios

Country Focal Points:

Argentina: **Juan Ignacio Reppucci**
Bolivia: **Gabriela Aguirre**
Chile: **Nicolás Lagos & Gonzalo Cruz**
Perú: **Dennis Huisa**

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