HIGH-LEVEL INFORMATION

AN INFORMATION CENTRE ON SOUTH AMERICAN CAMELIDS

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Vast areas of the South American Andes lie above 4000 metres. At this altitude, climatic conditions are severe, and the differences between daytime and nighttime weather and temperatures are drastic. Frost occurs on some 300 nights a year. Average rainfall varies greatly from one area to another, and droughts are not uncommon.

Under such conditions, agriculture becomes a hazardous business, limited almost entirely to native crops first sown by the pre-Columbian inhabitants of these lands. Animal production, using natural pasturelands, could offer a more reliable source of food than agriculture.

This is where the South American camelids — alpacas, llamas, vicunas, and guanacos — could play an important role. Fully adapted to the Andean highlands, these animals are now found on approximately five million hectares of pastureland in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Argentina. For some 200 000 rural families, camelid raising constitutes the principal source of livelihood. The wool of these animals is used in the textile industry. Camelid meat is often the sole source of animal protein, and the skins are used to make warm garments or as materials for handicrafts. The animals are also used as beasts of burden.

Llamas are found from the Ecuadorian sierra to the northwestern region of Argentina. Alpacas roam over a region of about 200 kilometres around Lake Titicaca in Peru and Bolivia. Both species have been domesticated. Their importance lies in the fact that, unlike beef cattle and sheep, they can survive and reproduce above 4250 metres where no crops can be grown.

Today, it is estimated that 80 percent of all alpacas and llamas are owned by small farmers who use the land communally and earn individual incomes of no more than U.S. $200 per year.

Vicunas and guanacos are wild animals. The vicuna lives mainly in the altiplano region of Peru and Bolivia, while the guanaco is found in the Patagonia area of Argentina. Both animals are endangered species, protected by law in the three countries where they live. Illegal hunting and trade of these animals nevertheless continue to threaten their existence.

All of these camelids are native species. However, their survival and well-being are plagued by several health, nutritional, and management problems that impede the development of camelid raising. Overcoming these problems would mean better standards of living for rural communities and a decrease in rural migration to cities.

Scientists in the region have long been interested in these animals. But available information on them is scattered and remains largely unknown because no central agency exists to organize, channel, and disseminate the information at both national and international levels.

The need for an information centre specializing in South American camelids became clear in 1978 when Bolivia's Wool Promotion Institute (INFOL) (see box, "The Institutes") approached IDRC with the idea of setting up such a centre, much like the one on cassava that functions at the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Colombia.

At that time, IDRC was studying a research proposal on South American camelids presented by the Institute for Tropical and High-Altitude Veterinary Research (IVITA) in

Llamas come to market in Peru: a more certain livelihood than crops for small farmers.

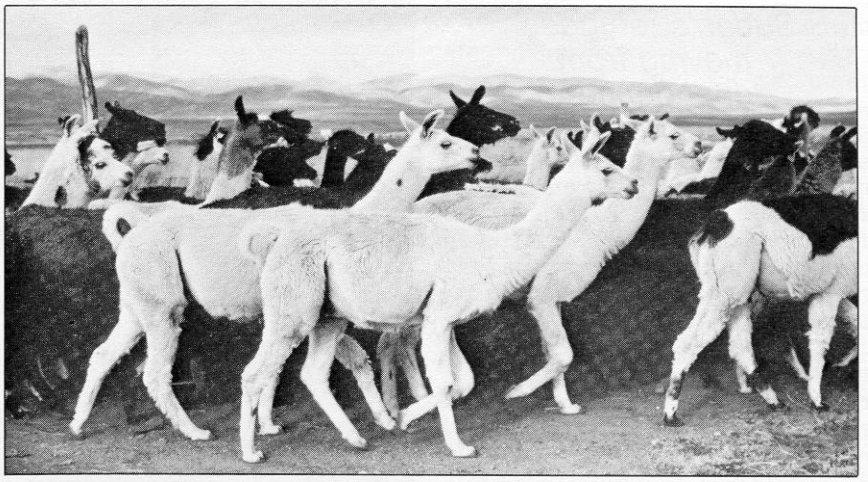
Peru, which also has a considerable amount of material on this subject.

After some study and consultation, IDRC thought it best to counsel these two institutes to join in one project. To this end, a meeting of IVITA and INFOL officials was called in 1981 to examine the possibility of coordinating activities and to draw up a proposal for the creation of a specialized centre, run by both, whose purpose would be to analyze information on South American camelids.

THE PROJECT

The new centre, to be based at sources in each of the Institutes, will collect, process and disseminate information on South American camelids. Its services will be available to interested institutions and individuals. By furthering the knowledge of the four camelid species, it aims to support the theoretical and practical work undertaken to increase the production and utilization of these animals.

The information may open new horizons for the inhabitants of the high Andes, who count among their assets a handful of camelids. □



More information about camelids will increase their usefulness.

THE INSTITUTES

Instituto de Fomento Lanero (Wool Promotion Institute), (INFOL). Established by the Bolivian government in 1977, the Institute is responsible for improving camelid and sheep production and productivity. Its activities include research into production, marketing, and industrializing camelid products and by-products, as well as formulating policies designed to raise the living standards of farmers. The Institute produces, adapts, improves, and disseminates scientific and technological knowledge on these subjects.

With the protection agreement on the vicuna in 1979, INFOL became a multinational information centre on camelids. Currently, the centre has almost one thousand processed documents on this subject. Centre director, Armando Cardozo, an expert on camelids, has also compiled a three-volume, 2000-item bibliography on this subject.

Instituto Veterinario de Investigaciones Tropicales y de Altura (Institute for Tropical and High-Altitude Veterinary Research), (IVITA). The Institute is one of three research centres located at San Marcos University in Lima, Peru. Created in 1962 by an agreement between the Peruvian government and FAO, the Institute is comprised of a technical and administrative centre in Lima, three main stations and two substations.

IVITA receives international support from Switzerland, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and IDRC, among others.

IVITA research has made a significant contribution to current knowledge of South American camelid biology. The Institute has also conducted very valuable research on parasitic diseases, the physiology of digestive processes, and reproduction in alpacas.

THE INFORMATION NETWORKS

The information centre on South American camelids will be the newest of specialized information centres supported by IDRC. In these centres, information specialists and subject specialists cooperate to evaluate and consolidate information in narrowly defined subject areas to meet the expressed needs of users.

During the past years, IDRC has supported a number of such centres on specific crops: cassava (Colombia); tropical grain legumes (Nigeria); sorghum and millets (India); coconuts (Sri Lanka); field beans and lentils (Syria); and bananas and plantains (Panama). Other centres deal with a wide variety of topics: on-farm irrigation (Israel); water buffaloes (Thailand); diarrheal diseases (Bangladesh); African maps (Ethiopia); rural youth activities (Costa Rica); packaging materials and techniques (Hong Kong); geotechnical engineering (Thailand); ferrocement (Thailand); and environmental sanitation (Thailand).

Placed in institutions that are centres-of-excellence for research in the subjects to be treated, these information centres can tailor information to the client's language and particular interest. And because of their narrow subject focus, collections of materials — often unavailable through other means — can be accommodated without necessarily having recourse to a computer for retrieval purposes.