

THE PUMA FOUNDATION CHANGING THE RELATION BETWEEN MANKIND AND THE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE BETTER



Belen de Andamarca and Toledo are two villages located in southern Bolivia. The region is situated in the altiplano and has a population of aymara and quechua whose territorial organization is made up of *ayllus*, coexisting with communal organizations and territorial base organizations (OTB).

The majority of the habitants raise sheep for local consumption, and because of climate and soil factors grow crops only for domestic use. In the area are many llamas and alpacas and also vicuñas a wild camelid.

In Bolivia, since 2002, the vicuña population has been found in the Appendix II of CITES, the international list of endangered and threatened species. Due to the growth of the vicuña population, the local communities have begun collecting the fur according to national regulations. Vicuña fur due to its fineness and rarity is much in demand in international markets.



The communities of Belen de Andamarca and Toledo don't have the resources to properly manage the vicuña, and in fact are unable to support themselves and improve the quality of life.

A change had to be made. Five local communities decided to come together and start a vicuña management project fitting in with the local ecosystems; in this way bringing in more income by leaving behind the old, inefficient practices.

In five years the project is expected to bring in enough income to 180 local families to begin exporting vicuña fur to other markets.

This project is only one example of the many enterprises begun in various rural communities in Bolivia with the help of the Fundación Protección y Uso Sostenible del Medio Ambiente PUMA; through the Escuela de Proyectos, an interactive medium for the construction and learning of projects managing renewable resources into the development sustainable framework.

PUMA's objective is to change the relationship between mankind and the environment and believes in generating production in rural communities in harmony with the local environment taking advantage of renewable resources while improving the quality of life.

Reflected in the philosophy of PUMA in regards to its help in local communities is the difference between telling someone what time it is to teaching someone how to build a watch.

The communities of Belen de Andamarca and Toledo, as well as 40 other Bolivian communities have both designed and executed this project using their own experience in their own natural environment, so that both in the long and short term improve their possibilities to reduce levels of poverty.



The foundation spreads these benefits among the population, and creates the opportunity to generate knowledge and skills to further the formation of more projects.

It's fundamental for the foundation to ensure that interests and objectives are compatible with the beneficiaries and executors of the project; also to provide technical assistance and generate capital.

In order for the ideas of the project to be approved easily, they should be placed in prioritized areas of PUMA: forests and woodlands, biodiversity resources and water sources.

The beneficiaries can be sure that any project approved by the foundation will be subject to certain requirements; such as a positive effect on the base communities, improving the region's potentiality as well as reducing the region's problems.

The communities can also rely on the existence of a national political strategy in order to confront the lack of financial resources. The reality in Bolivia is that woodland, biological and water resources don't currently generate enough income for their management, partly because the communities are directly located within these ecosystems.

It's worth mentioning that 50 percent of Bolivia is covered by woodland and is considered to be among the 15 top biodiverse countries in the world. This means that Bolivia is one of the world's most megadiverse countries and deserves global support in order to conserve this biodiversity.

In acknowledgment of these statistics, the foundation expects the communities' active participation and the strengthening of local institutions, sharing responsibility against the challenge of changing man's relationship with his environment.

The political aid of the various communities translates into compromise, coordination among different institutions, and creation of strategic alliances that will result in positive benefits with increasing value.

As a result the foundation has developed an innovative system of environmental enterprises that in only ten months of existence has financed close to a million dollars.

The goal of PUMA, using a strategic plan is to accumulate in 10 years 50 million dollars and channel another 25 million into at least 200 new enterprises.

"This is an opportunity of a lifetime that we know is in our hands" were the words of Severo Choque; representative of the vicuña managers of Belen de Andamarca and Toledo upon learning of the approval of the communities' project. The time has come to create watches.■

