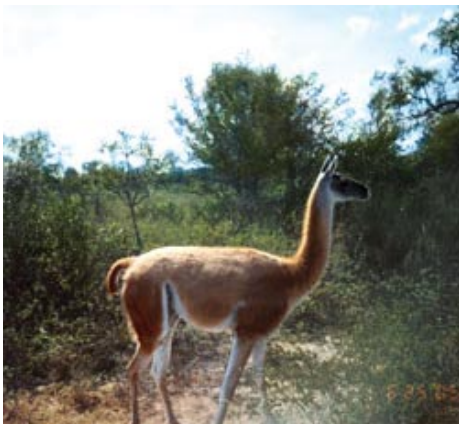


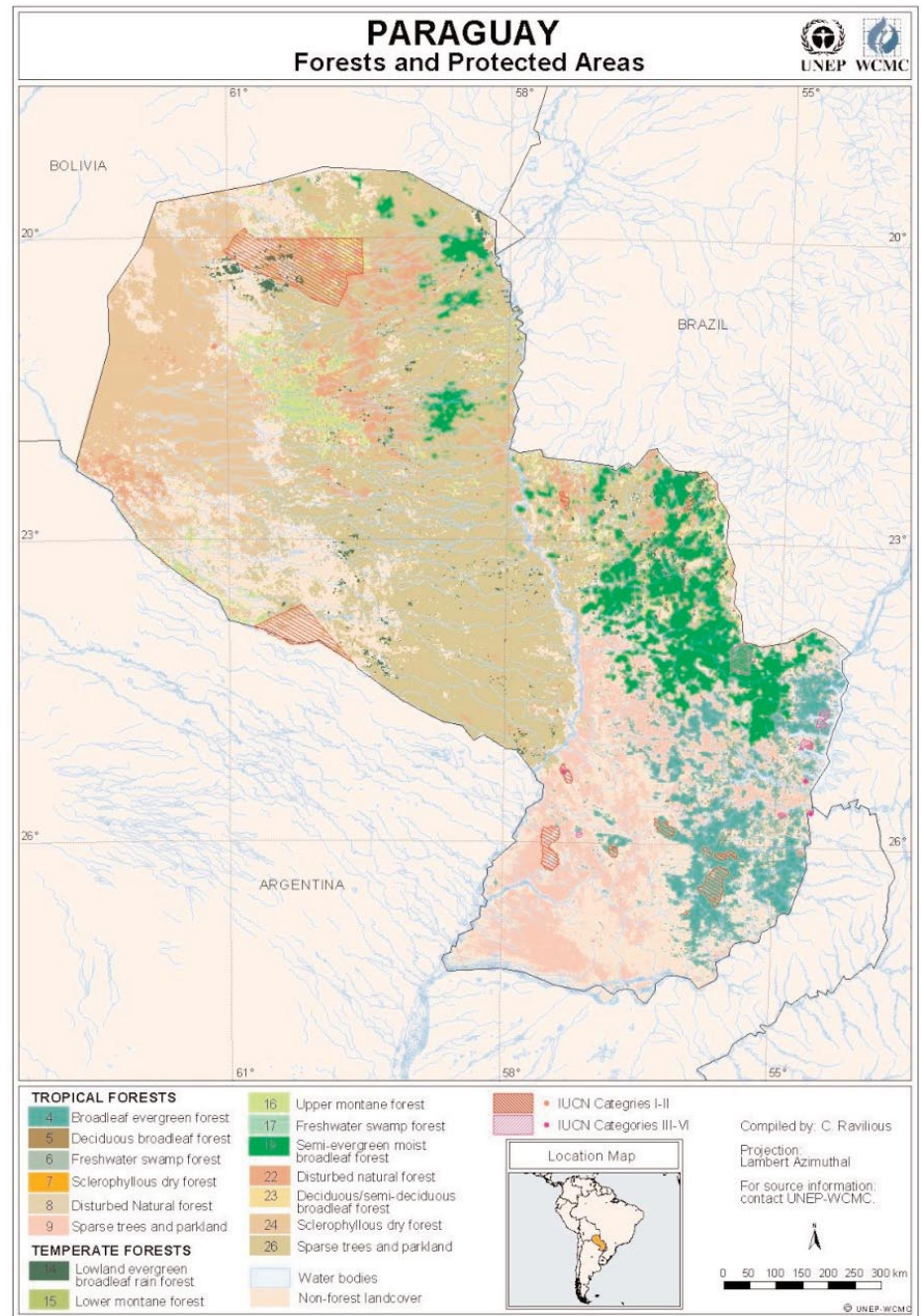
# Rediscovering the Guanaco in the Paraguay Chaco

by *Laura Villalba and Cristian Bonacic*  
*www.fauna-australis.puc.cl*



**T**he Gran Chaco, located between latitude 17° and 33° South and between longitude 65° and 60° West, is a vast plain that extends through northern Argentina, southeastern Bolivia, northwestern Paraguay and into a small area of southwestern Brazil. It stretches for about 1500 km from north to south, and about 700 km from east to west, without any important physical barriers intervening.

For more than 40 years, the guanaco of the Chaco ecosystem of Paraguay has taken on an almost mythic status. Does it really exist or is it the stuff of legend? Wildlife conservationists in Paraguay are now celebrating new evidence, documented with camera traps, that proves this subspecies of guanaco still persists in the harsh arid region of the Gran Chaco. The months with highest temperature coincide with those of maximum rainfall. This fact has favoured the evolution of herbaceous



forage species adapted to sandy soil and extremely high temperature. The Chaco is principally a sub-tropical zone, with winter frosts occurring less frequently in the northeast and with higher frequency going towards the southwest. Because of its continental climate there are large variations in temperatures between summer and winter and 40° C can be reached when the sun is high (December to March). The average rainfall varies from 450 to 850 mm. During the rainy season, 400 to 600 mm fall.

Camera traps are frequently used in wildlife studies to track elusive species in thick and dense forest habitats. As far as

I know this is the first time they are being used for guanacos. Guanacos usually inhabit open grasslands however the Chaco is a very dense and closed tall matorral habitat. The guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) is one of the four camelids of South America. The guanaco is a typical species of the cold steppes of Patagonia and the high, cold plains of the Andes. Somehow, surprisingly, it has adapted to the Chaco one of the hottest, almost arid, ecosystems in South America. In the Chaco ecosystem livestock, fire and hunting caused the near extinction of the guanacos. Now they are being rediscovered in the most extreme and

isolated corner of Paraguay.

Since 2004, as director of Wildlife Trust Alliance and member of Fauna Australis of Santiago, Chile, I have collaborated on this project with La Fundación DeSdel Chaco. A recent visit to the Medanos del Chaco National Park during November 2005, served to strengthen an alliance between Fauna Australis and the foundation, aimed toward developing a conservation project with local communities and the Chilean government.

I believe the rediscovery of the guanacos is one of vital importance and a tremendous achievement. Local conservationists, led by Laura Villalba, have demonstrated that guanacos, an endangered species, still survive in the Paraguay Chaco. With this evidence, La Fundación DeSdel Chaco is collaborating with the Government to protect the single known population of the country. It is truly a rediscovery of a 120 kilos animal!

Actually, I saw jaguar tracks in the guanaco study area and suspect that a large prey like the guanaco still may play a role in the jaguar diet. Protecting the guanaco is not only important in itself; it is part of the needed conservation processes agenda for large protected areas. (Medanos del Chaco is a 0.5 million ha Chaco territory).

The guanaco is a flagship species for these vast and degraded ecosystems of South America, an ecological equivalent to the kangaroo in Australia or the bison in the U.S. Guanacos are undoubtedly a keystone in the diet of the jaguar, another typical Chaco species. Protecting the guanaco is the first crucial step towards protecting the large mammals of the Paraguay's Chaco ecosystem."

Local government officers from the Ministry of Environment are extremely happy about this finding. Gissela Escobar, a wildlife officer from the Paraguay Ministry of the Environment, endured an arduous journey with us that spanned sandy roads and 50 degrees Celsius temperatures for a round trip that completed 1,600 km in 48 hours!

Future research and collaboration between the government, La Fundación DeSdel Chaco, Fauna Australis and Wildlife Trust aim to understand how

guanacos are surviving, whether local communities may play a role in conserving this key species, and how jaguars and guanacos are interacting.

**CQ**

#### **About the Author**

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*He is also a member of The Wildlife Trust Alliance. While pursuing his doctorate in sustainable utilisation of South American camelids at Oxford, he received the first Davis Lama Medicine Award from Ohio State University. His research expertise includes stress physiology, conservation of wild camelids and sustainable use (vicuna and guanaco). He is the Director of The Environmental Sciences Diploma and Coordinator of the first Master Science Program aimed to Wildlife Management and Conservation.*

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