In 1995 Vanishing Cultures Foundation, Inc. began to work with the indigenous people of the high Andes in Peru. One of our many endeavors is the Alpaca Project, which is part of the Mountain Medical Team. This project was created to improve the quality of the alpaca and llama herds owned by the Q’ero Indians. On our first visit to the Q’ero villages, we found the herds of alpaca and llama in horrible condition. They numbered approximately 3000. Their reproduction rate was about 5 percent, and the wool and meat quality very poor, basically unusable.

Although these animals had been fairly isolated from the outside world, we found that they had very heavy infestations of both internal and external parasites. The big question was where did they originate from? After much research, we found the beautiful, pristine, glacial lakes and rivers were the carriers of many types of parasites and disease.

Another complication was that the Q’ero men would occasionally go to the lower village to buy necessities. They used their alpaca and llama as pack animals. We determined that the Q’ero animals were infected with external parasites from their lowland relatives. The animals, in turn, brought the parasites back to the Q'ero villages where they spread quickly throughout the herds.

In the past 8 years, the VCF Mountain Medical Team has not only attended to the needs of the Q’ero people, but also to the needs of their herds of llama and alpaca. We treat the animals annually for internal and external parasites. This is an amazing experience. The guiding principles of the Q’ero is the practice of Ayllu and Ayni. Ayni is about honoring and giving back for everything they have. They give thanks to the spirit, the earth, the sky, the stars, their livestock, and to each other for the beauty they have in their lives. They believe everything in the world contains living energy. Ayllu is about honoring community. Helping others will in turn always help you. The Alpaca project is a magnificent example of community ayni.
Our team never knows exactly when we will arrive at the villages. Due to the difficult trek, it can take from 1 to 3 days. We have no communication with the Qero people. Within 1 day of our arrival at our base village, the people and animals from all the other communities begin to appear. That includes hundreds of villagers and now 6000 llama and alpaca. We begin our work with a meeting of the village elders to catch up since our last expedition.

The men become organized immediately, everyone participates and helps. Some men administer the medications for the internal parasites, and then send the animals on to the dip tank crew. The dip tank was designed by a priest a number of years ago although it took about 10 years to actually fund and build. It is your basic dip tank, not unlike those in North America. There is one 3 sided paddock, made of stone, to collect the animals in prior to dipping, the dip canal tank, and 2 stone paddocks, where the animals drain and dry off. From here the excess chemicals drain back into the dip tank. Take into account, that these people have carried the supplies up to 19,000 feet to make this concrete structure. Using only hand tools, they dig through frozen earth to construct the tank. Canals were also dug to transport the glacial waters which fill the tank. Bringing in 6000 animals for dipping is the easy part! Throwing the llama and alpaca into the tank gives everyone some entertainment. However hauling the animals out at the other end is not easy. Although there are stairs at one end of the tank, once the animals are soaked with the frigid water, they become very heavy. The simple wooden scoop hooks are not strong enough to pull them out, so the men jump in the tank, with all the chemicals, to assist the animals in climbing out. Surprisingly enough, this process goes along quickly and without any problems. Although the looks on the animals’ faces are not a look of appreciation or pleasure.

While the men are busy with the care of the animals, the woman cook lunch and dinner. The meals consist of various types of potatoes, which are the main food of the Q’ero. When the meals are prepared, the women catch up with friends, while constantly spinning the beautiful wool from their animals. The children gather, learn, and play. No one sits with nothing to do. This is the only time when all of the village people get together. They work hard, help each other and celebrate when the work is done. It takes approximately 4-5 days to care for all the animals.

The work of Vanishing Cultures Foundation, Inc.’s Alpaca Project has been very successful. The wool and meat quality is now good, but could be better. The reproductive rate has greatly improved, with herds now numbering over 6000. This fact allows this ancient tribe to continue to weave their blankets and clothing in the way that they have for hundreds of years, and to also have a small excess to sell. Today, due to the work of VCF, the finer quality wool assists in the economic development of the Q’ero villages. The men now travel to lower villages where they can sell the excess textiles to tourists. This, in turn, allows them to purchase necessary items for their families.
The Q’ero are the only living direct descendants of the Inca. They have lived in self-imposed exile for nearly 500 years, escaping the persecution of the Spanish conquistadors. In 1959, the first Q’ero was seen by a local anthropologist, who noticed the unique weaving patterns of their clothes and their language. The Q’ero came down from the mountain to fulfill their prophesies which was to teach their spiritual practices, cultural traditions, and healing techniques to those of the West.

Today, the Q’ero still exist in the same way that they have done for 500 years. They live in isolated hamlets at elevations of 15,000 to 19,000 feet. They reside in small stone houses with thatched roofs, no electricity, no running water and use llama and alpaca manure to fuel their fires for both heat and cooking.

The conditions at these elevations are severe and difficult for man and animal. The people exist on a diet basically consisting of a variety of potatoes. The llama and alpaca free range for what little food they can find. The Q’ero believe that the alpaca and llama are very sacred, noble beings. As darkness falls in the villages, all the herds return home. At sunrise, these sacred animals rise and face Father Sun, called Inti Tyty.

The journey to the Q’ero is long, cold and difficult. It is as breathtaking as it is dangerous. Very few people dare venture to go there. The trails are simple paths made by men, llama, and alpacas in their travels. The trails are about 10 inches wide and drop thousands of feet to the side. There are parts of the “trail” which are washed out due to rains, mudslides and rockslides. Many times, we have to make our own trail. The flat areas are just as dangerous hiding treacherous bogs. It can be deadly getting stuck in a bog, being wet and cold at high altitudes is very unsafe. Our team must move slow and cautiously.

In the spirit of “ayni”, VCF, Inc. includes a textile called a “Mestana” in its $250 annual membership fee. A Mestana is a child’s receiving blanket, and is the first thing to touch a newborn after the Mother Earth, or Pachamama. The Q’ero have told us that this cloth contains the imprint of the Pachamama and of the Inca tradition. These are beautiful textiles which are still created in the same method as their the Inca ancestors. They carry the only language of the Inca in their patterns. Because of the work we do, VCF has the privilege of having many, very old Mestana’s. Only by the funds we collect by their sale, and through personal donations, can we continue this crucial work.

VCF, Inc. is a USA Massachusetts based 501c3 nonprofit organization since 1996. We are the only group who has consistently assisted the high Q’ero villages since 1996. Our funds go directly to the people. Our board and teams (excluding Peruvian staff) are all volunteers. If you would like to know more about our projects, or how to assist in any way, please contact us.