

The robbing of the wild: endangered, wild *Chinchilla brevicaudata*, at least one dead and others caged for life

Early in March 2001, my friend called me. He was very excited because he had encountered wild *Chinchilla brevicaudata* feces and teeth in fox feces in northern Chile. Months later, three nights of live trapping resulted in 11 captures of the species believed extinct in the wild (even after much effort to find the species, this chinchilla was not known in Peru, Chile, Argentina and Bolivia since the 1920~Rs). In all, six of the ten individuals captured were taken to a holding facility at the University of La Serena under the care and supervision of Mr. Arturo Cortes for the period of one month. At the end of that time, during which he would conduct research on their physiology, he would release them at capture site. Approximately three weeks after their capture, I was permitted to place smoke card in their cages at the university. When asked what I thought of the chinchillas, I replied that there were no feces in the cages, and I expressed concerns about the change in their diet. Also, the animals were in much need of a dust bath. At the end of the fifth week of captivity, I learned that the animals were still under the care of Mr. Cortes. His equipment was not functioning and he acquired permission from CONAF (the Chilean Parks Service) to hold the animals for more time. At that time, I received a visit from Dr. Ivan Ramirez the chief of SAG (the Chilean agency in charge of livestock and agriculture) in Illapel. I expressed concern for the animals. Also, Victor Lagos from CONAF -La Serena visited my restoration study site for the endangered *Chinchilla lanigera*. We talked about the wild chinchillas. Both of us had concerns about the animals being in captivity for such a time period. I mailed a book on the care of domestic chinchillas to Mr. Cortes. Even after the death of one of the animals, they were still under his care in May 2001. I visited Dr. Ramirez and spoke with him and Mr. Agustin Iriarte (Chief of Wildlife, SAG, Chile) about the animals. Mr. Iriarte then proceeded to describe the fate of the animals. Three males were to be taken to a breeding program whose goal is to improve captive stock genetics, with no hope of ever being wild again. Why not take sperm from the males, and impregnate the captive females, and release these endangered wild chinchillas? A team of researchers in Argentina has developed a chinchilla ejaculation machine specifically for this species. Also, not once were known chinchilla experts contacted and consulted about the fate of the chinchillas that my friend captured and re-discovered. These actions do not make any sense to me, as a chinchilla researcher, a chinchilla conservationist or a domestic chinchilla pet owner. I do not understand how government institutions help conserving a species in extreme risk of extinction by placing 3 of the 9 known wild individuals of this species in cages only to boost captive genetic stock. I do not understand why the species is not first studied in the wild before taking any decision. In my opinion, the fate of these chinchillas reveals to the world the ethics of scientific research not only in Chile but worldwide and the state of Chilean wildlife policy.

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