



Sarita Escalante Tellana. Photo by Robert Els

Peru's Quechua-Speaking People of Picotani Speak to You in their Own Voice

with Mike Safley

Quechua Benefit was in Picotani in December 2021 completing the filming of their vicuña documentary, *Vicuña Salvation*. The team conducted individual interviews with people in the community that Quechua Benefit has worked with for more than 20 years. The Quechua Benefit team usually travels with a translator due to their dismal Spanish. This approach creates a lot of “lost in translation.”

The documentary interviews were in Spanish with Luis Ara, the film's director from Uruguay, asking all the questions. He is charismatic and does a very good job putting the interviewee at ease. The following is a verbatim transcript of the interview.

Sarita is speaking directly to you about her life raising alpaca and living at 15,500 feet above sea level. Please continue reading until the last sentence.

Sarita Escalánte Tellana

Tell me a little about this town.

My name is Sarita Escalánte Tellana, right now we are in the Multicomunal Picotani.

No one had thought about breeding vicuñas. A long time ago, in the time of the company, there were two managers who thought about this. One of them thought that one day this would grow, and that was what happened.

There were not as many vicuñas as you can see now, there were only 13 vicuñas on the other side of this Huanca Huancane. This was fenced because within it they also raised skinny sheep and alpacas.

What do you do with vicuñas?

We have worked a lot with the vicuñas, because before there were only these enclosed fields to bathe cattle. There was almost nothing at that time. Nor was Picotani so populated, there was only the office, the rooms of those who worked and where the tower is, but over time it has become populated.

Are vicuñas an important part of your life today?

Yes, quite important. No one thought they were going to expand to this amount.

What work do you do with vicuñas?

Vicuñas were hardly considered important before, but we did. First, we began to build a fence. There was little enclosure on the other side. We began to fence, and then the vicuñas spread a lot. Right now the three communities have vicuña: Cambria, Toma, Picotani plus the Multicomunal.



Vicuñas in the pastures around Multicomunal Picotani. Photo by @loudscape.nef

Does this mean an income for you?

We get the income from vicuña fiber, but it is extremely hard work. We have to fight a lot; both with the hunters and with the cold. It's not easy.

What makes vicuña fiber special?

The fiber of the vicuña is special because it is fine.

Do they use it for knitting?

Here in Peru, they do not allow us to weave it, but instead I have gone to Bolivia, and I have seen how they go out to the fairs and spread their products out in the streets. Here in Peru, it is not like that.

I dedicate myself more to the alpaca, sheep and cows, but above all, alpaca breeding.



Woman in Picotani dehairing vicuña fiber. Photo by Maria Belen

I understand that you are a very important leader in the community...

There are several of us. I am not a leader, only someone born into the community. We try to bring added value to our homes, not to be empty-handed. We have raw material and with that we have started with courses from different institutions and so we have been able to do something for our homes.

What is the role of women in the Picotani community?

Now, we are improving because in the past they did not let women be seen, or go out, or study, anything, only at home, that was the way it was before. But not anymore. Now, we go out to the offices, we know the courses, all those things.

Does that empower women?

We must also know our rights, both spiritually and materially, nor is it to say "I cannot operate with the new decrees" that come out for both women and men. We "adapt" to those laws, but we have to know our place.

What is the woman's place?

To be in our homes, to be with our children, with our livestock, with our community, with our organization. We must know all that.



Sarita's alpacas. Photo by @loudscape.nef

How do you imagine the world of young women? What is going to be in their place in the future?

It's a bit difficult to say because it is rather corrupted. It is no longer as before, there is no respect. Formerly there was respect, but not now, it is not the same.

How can you work to help that correct?

It's a bit difficult because from home you have to start respecting. Also, the children have to grow in that environment because when they grow up it is a little difficult to correct them. It must be done when they are children. Respect begins in the home.



The women of Picotani waiting to begin the Vicuña Chaccu. Photo by @loudscape.nef

How important is it for you to maintain the traditions of Quechua culture?

Particularly important because in the past everything was respected. Now everything is being lost and the new generation migrates to the cities. They are no longer in the countryside, only a few, one or the other.

What needs to be done to get them to stay here?

Other people will have to talk to them because among us I do not believe so. I do not think they will settle for that. Others have to come to talk to them, to encourage them. But not everyone is the same; there are young people who do understand.

**Do you know the Quechua Benefit Foundation?
What have they done for Picotani?**

When they came the first few times, they mostly supported the children. They brought dentists, but at that time I rarely came to the Multi. I stayed with the cattle, then, little by little, I began to develop.

How important is the help they give you?

How eager is Quechua Benefit to support us? The presidents have been in office for two years during the pandemic, and not everything is fulfilled so well. Also the people do not have the same capacity, out there they are not so much in communication. Perhaps also because of the pandemic Quechua Benefit has not come so much, but they will continue to come.



A mother and her children who received supplies from Quechua Benefit during the pandemic. Photo by Alejandro Tejada

What would you like the future of Picotani to look like?

My dream is to keep going, no matter what.



Quechua Benefit Founder Mike with Dr. Mario Pedroza during the first dental mission to Picotani. The crowd of patients was ten deep, and we had to leave to go home. We promised everyone we would return in the spring, and we have been returning ever since.