



José Escalante and Mike in Picotani, December 2021. Photo by Robert Els

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

with Mike Safley

Mike Safley, the founder of Quechua Benefit, first met the community leaders of Picotani while conducting a dental mission in Muñani, a town near the Michells' Estancia Mallkini more than 20 years ago. One evening shortly after dinner, someone knocked at the front door. José Escalante appeared and said, "We heard you were doing dental work in town. We have children who have bad teeth." Then he asked, "Will you help?"

Mike told them that it would be impossible at that time, but maybe they could in the future. Jose persisted, saying, "If you come, we will make a *Vicuña Chaccu for your team.*" The team immediately voted to visit Picotani the next morning. Quechua Benefit has visited almost every year since, forming a close bond with the community.

Quechua Benefit was in Picotani in December 2021 completing the filming of their *Vicuña* documentary, *Vicuña Salvation – the greatest wildlife conservation story never told.* 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.

José Escalante

My name is José Escalante. We are in fence two, which belongs to the Multicommunal Committee of Vicuña Management that make up three communities: Picotani, Cambria, and Toma.

What relationship do you have with Mike and Quechua Benefit?

I have known Mr. Mike (Safley) for about twenty years. I was president of this organization, and Mr. Moses said to me one day: "José, some gringos from the United States are coming." I invited them; the next day we had a *Vicuña Chaccu*. Back then they were dealing with tooth extraction. They came, we performed the *Chaccu* for them with a lot of love and appreciation, and since that time Mike has been visiting us.

I'm sure he has really liked the appreciation of the people. The people of the Multi are very affectionate, hospitable. We always invite the people who come to share what we have, if there is something to eat, they will have them to eat. The people are very hospitable.

Since then, I have known Mr. Mike and for me he is a very special person. I have a special regard for him, and I always remember him. The problem is the language because I speak Spanish and he speaks English, and we cannot communicate clearly.



Mother and child in Picotani. The little girl is receiving liquid vitamins for anemia. Photo by Robert Els

How important is Quechua Benefit to the community?

It is important. It has helped us in the dosage of dogs, also in the dosage of alpacas, and in the anemia of children. At one time with Dr. Mario Pedroza, foreign doctors came to attend people, and they were happy because he does not come to take advantage, but everything he brings he brings with affection and is done for free. He does not charge us, and that is a tremendous thing.

Are they now helping with the water project?

Yes, last year Mike came and said, "Let's do this," and we received it with affection because all this water pipe laying, we have done with investment of our organization. We had to take advantage, stay connected. At that time I was not part of the board, but I am always calling Mr. Alejandro, the Quechua Benefit Director in Peru, asking how it is, when. It is our water...

They have already given us the one-and-a-half-inch polytubes, and we are happy. Right now, we are planning how we install them, where we expand to be able to provide the water to the animals in times of drought.

There is a dam called Poqoña within the community of Cambria. That dam has been built with the support of an Italian NGO or company. They have also supported us, and the water has been dammed, the 6-inch tube has been laid and they have made a project for "Agroideas," which is part of the State. The NGO has financed us, and with that we have laid the tubes of 6-inch tubes that go around the other side. That has helped us to install the missing part with Quechua Benefit. This water goes to fence one, where the vicuñas are in Huanca Huancane. This water is exclusively for vicuñas.



Water pipe being loaded in Juliaca on its way to Picotani for the Vicuña habitat expansion. Quechua Benefit believes that one of the best economic development programs for highland communities is creating surface water catchments to expand pastures and habitat for additional vicuñas and alpacas. Photo by Robert Els



Alpaca family with their herd dog in Picotani. Photo by Ana Caroline de Lima

On behalf of the three communities that are Picotani, Cambria and Toma, which make up the Multicomunal Committee, I want to thank Mr. Mike of Quechua Benefit for supporting us.

And I am sure that they will continue to support us over time because it is very important for the conservation of our vicuñas, which apart from being a national symbol, economically, leaves us something per year that serves us for the family food basket. It is not much, but it serves us in something. Thanks a lot.

Where do your ancestors come from?

That's a long story. Where we are, before it was the Ganadera Picotani in the 50s and 60s: it was the cattle ranch in the time of the bosses. In 1969, at the time of President Juan Velasco Alvarado, they expropriated it and there the Six Picotani Limited number four was organized.

Is this like returning the power of these lands to those who were the owners centuries ago?

Here most of us are Quechua speakers. It has been passed down from generation to generation. You begin to see

more surnames like Mayhuasca, Mamani, Pasa, surnames that are not of powerful or rich people.

I speak Quechua. We are all Quechua speakers.

In 1985, when it was the time of García's first government, they expropriated what were the former Six and went on to form the peasant communities. From then until the 90s, the new peasant communities began to form.

Those of us who belong to this Multicomunal form three communities: Picotani, Toma and Cambria. At that time, in assemblies, it was agreed to leave a place for the vicuñas because the manager said that one day the vicuñas were going to bear fruit with the fibers and that we had to benefit. Therefore, when they left us that land, we created the Multicomunal Management Committee of Vicuña, made up of Picotani, Cambria and Toma.

In 1990 we organized, and in 1995 we formalized legally and registered in public registry. From then until today we are working.

Tell me where we are right now, on this hill with Picotani in the background.

Right now, we are at the site of the laying of the water pipes, which comes from the Poqoña dam and from where we begin to capture the water in a Rotoplas tank, and then take it through a one-inch tube to fence one; it is water, essential for the consumption of our vicuñas during the dry season.

We are in front of the Picotani peasant community and further down is the rural Multicomunal Picotani, which belongs to the Picotani Multicomunal Committee.

What does this community live on?

At the level of the three communities that belong to the Multicomunal, our main economic resource and income is the alpaca. The vicuña is a source of income that serves us, but it is rather small. The support of our families is

the breeding of alpacas, which serves us for the education of our children, food, health. If we didn't have alpacas at this point, I don't think we could live, and we wouldn't have any means of support.

Why are vicuñas important to you?

Apart from the fact that the vicuña is the national symbol, it is an exotic animal that we have in time. It is important because, at least for as long as I can remember, my parents have always taken care of vicuñas. It has been passed from generation to generation. I am sure that my children and their children will continue to take care of them. I can find no words, but it is a very important animal for us, although it is not like the alpaca, which maintains us economically, but it is there.

The vicuña began to give them more resources more than thirty years ago, correct?

Until 1994 you could not sell the fiber of the vicuña, but since then things have changed. Annually it gives us an economic income that serves to maintain the organization, the Multicomunal. It also pays the administrative part, the wages, we make investments. It's a very important thing for us.



José Escalante being interviewed by Luis Ara at the beginning of the water project that was created with assistance from Quechua Benefit. Photo by Andrew Curtis



The chaccu in progress at Picotani. Notice in the top right hand corner of this photo a line of people behind hundreds of vicuña.
Photo by @loudscape.nef

How important is the day the Chaccu is made to you?

The day of the Chaccu is tremendous for us because it is something we have been doing for years. The Chaccu of the vicuña, if you have read history, comes from the time of the Inca. That day we have to capture the vicuña very carefully, classify it, shear it and release it. As vicuñas have entered, they have to return to the paddocks in the same way without suffering any kind of damage.

Is that something that wasn't happening and that's why vicuñas were about to go extinct by poachers?

Until the 90s, if I am not mistaken, the vicuñas were abandoned. They were about 60,000 in population at the level of Peru, but from the 90s to now begins the project of "rational use of the vicuña" that was created with funds from the German government, and they began to take care of them in Ayacucho and Puno as well. With what is the

former Six Picotani we began to take care of the vicuñas and the population began to increase, but we have had problems at that time with poaching. Here in the Multi the poachers have also punished us very severely.

In 1994, when vicuña fiber was first sold to Italy, more interest was taken in the subject. The people themselves said, "we have to work," because the first income arrived: money. People started working with more enthusiasm and more love, and that's who we are today.

We have started small. When the Six began, there were more or less than 650 vicuñas and we have come to have about 4,000 at the level of the Multicomunal. But if we add up at the level of the three communities, we must have 10,000 vicuñas.



*A Picotani park ranger who remains vigilant against the poachers.
Photo by Robert Els*

How do they fight those poachers?

When poaching began to hit us, as support the government began to create park rangers: communal guards equipped with weapons, bulletproof vests, and uniforms so as to patrol all the territories where the vicuñas are located.



A vicuña family of six grazing the grasslands of Picotani. Photo by Ana Caroline de Lima

Here in the Multicomunal we have suffered a tremendous poaching, but as a result of that, we organized, we began to buy weapons, bulletproof vests, uniforms, and binoculars. We equipped our park rangers, and we had to organize as a community to be able to face poaching. In an organized manner we made ourselves respected, and we have stopped it. There is no more poaching.

You guys have invested in buying land here, haven't you?

Effectively. The place we have here in La Pampa has cost us. The State has not invested anything. We have been reinvesting our money. The other thing we have done is to expand the fences that are on the other side, in another community.

We have bought 450 hectares because our fences are one and two, with a high population, and we need more space to move vicuñas so that they are healthy and quiet. That is why we have been expanding.

So today, you own these lands and you also get the benefit of the vicuñas.

The three communities own this land and, as such, we use it exclusively for the grazing of vicuñas. We take care of it, as the government has given us, in exchange for which we can shear vicuña and with that we benefit economically.

And with that they buy more land to be able to expand the territory that was once yours...

As owners, we also continue to acquire more land that is also for the three communities.