

Jane Wheeler, President of CONOPA, a Nuñoa Project affiliate honored with Meritorious Award

On September 16, 2016 Jane Wheeler was honored with the award “Meritorious Personality of Culture for her research, scientific production and the transcendent importance of her contributions to Peruvian archaeology both nationally and internationally.”

After completing her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan in 1973, she spent 1974-1975 as a Senior Fulbright-Hays Fellow teaching archaeology at San Marcos University in Lima, Peru. Her specialization in archaeozoology, the study of animal remains from excavated sites, was a new discipline at the time, and her identification of extinct horse and deer species among the bones from sites in the central sierra of Peru caused quite a stir in her first weeks in the country. From this point her career focused on the study of innumerable bones from many archaeological sites in Peru and the process of domestication that led to herding of alpaca and llama. At the site of Telarmachay, (4,400 meters above sea level in the central Andes) the excavated sequence covered the time from the first human settlement by human groups who hunted vicuña, guanaco and deer; through domestication of the vicuña and establishment of an alpaca based herding economy. At the site of El Yaral (100 meters above sea level on the south coast) the discovery of naturally mummified alpacas and llamas provided a detailed picture of the physical appearance and fiber quality of preconquest animals.



Debate over her conclusion that the vicuña is the ancestor of the alpaca and interest in the impact of the conquest on native Andean livestock has led Wheeler’s research beyond archaeology. In a 2001 publication, together with colleagues from Cardiff University, DNA analysis resolved the debate, confirming the archaeozoological evidence and changing the scientific name of the alpaca to *Vicugna pacos* to reflect its vicuña ancestry. In the process the research expanded to include DNA and the study of genetic variability of the vicuña, guanaco and, most recently, the alpaca, as a tool for reconstructing population history and for conservation planning.

Comparative study of contemporary and preconquest alpacas documents a clear deterioration in quality associated with marginalization of the herds and herders from society. At least 90% of both the alpaca and human populations in the Andean heartland perished within the first century of

Spanish rule leaving a heritage of poverty for the survivors. The current focus of Wheeler's research is to bring together history and science in order to reduce the poverty of traditional herders by improving the quality of their animals through education and a mutual learning process. In 2001 she co-founded in Lima CONOPA – Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo de Camélidos Sudamericanos, an independent research and development institute dedicated to furthering these goals. An ongoing, mutually beneficial collaboration has been established between CONOPA and the Nunoa Project, strengthening the commitment of both organizations to improving the well being of traditional Peruvian herders and their alpacas.