

## **Cannibalism in Andean Bears?**

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It is well known that most of the members of the Ursidae family are opportunistic eaters. The Andean bear is no exception. Although they primarily eat suro, a kind of bamboo, in the cloud forest of the Intag region of Ecuador, they also eat carrion. For this reason we use decomposing cow's feet as bait to facilitate the capture and radio-collared bears. Still, I had never thought that a dead Andean bear could be eaten by other bears.

In April this year we received an inactive signal from one of our radio-collared bears we named Alvaro. My field assistant Alberto Tabango, and I went to investigate what had happened. As we got closer to the radio collar, we encountered a trail strewn with broken branches and crushed plants. This appeared to have been produced by something that had been dragged. We had followed the trail for about 50 meters when we began to smell the odor of rotting flesh. While looking for where these smells came from, we discovered a tree platform that had been made by a bear. As we approached it, the odor became more intense, and subsequently we began to encounter pieces of bone with bits of unidentifiable meat of a large mammal.

We continued searching for the radio collar. The trail became a tunnel as it passed through dense stands of suro. A tunnel in vegetation is typical of a bear dragging its prey (I had frequently observed these tunnels in areas where bears prey on livestock). It appeared that one or more bears had been feeding on something.

Following the tunnel for another 50 meters, we encountered Alvaro's radio collar. I initially thought that Alvaro may have lost his collar and that the bear had been hauling the carcass of a deer (*Mazama americana*). However, 100 meters further down the tunneled path, we came across what remained of Alvaro's body. Chest, dorsal spine, forearms, and muscles had disappeared. We began to look for the cause of death. We found three holes approximately 7 mm in diameter in Alvaro's abdominal region and right lateral thorax, indicating that Alvaro had been shot by a hunter.

It was not possible to find the bullets in his body because of the distance that Alvaro was dragged. From the tracks we encountered we deduced that Alvaro was shot but escaped. It is well known that it is necessary to shoot a bear several times to kill it. Fatally wounded, the bear speedily left the scene of the shooting, where he tried to heal himself by licking. This was deduced from the quantity of hair in his mouth. Despite his

efforts, Alvaro eventually died and later was dragged and devoured by one or more fellow Andean bears.

The death of Alvaro has caused us great sadness. However, we feel that his loss was not in vain as it has helped us learn a little more because it is hard to find remains of large mammals, especially of bears in the cloud forests of Ecuador.