

T.A.G. CAVER



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On Cows and Karst

It's the same around the World

(More or Less)

By Mike Gringo

It seems that wherever a caver might wander in search of exploration he finds himself in the presence of the most recognized domesticated ungulates, *Bos primigenius*, or more commonly known as the cow. Is there a direct correlation between cows and karst? I'm not completely convinced but growing less skeptical all the time. One thing is for sure, this is not a theory that you will read in any geological journal or hear at a karst symposium. The thought came to me at 14,000' while staring at the orange nylon innards of my tent after waking with cold sweats from a lucid nightmare. I had awoken from a deep and troubled sleep where I was endlessly chased by a herd of wild and angry heifers that wanted little more than to trample the life out of me. I had never feared my food supply until the summer of 2010.

Let me rewind and begin by making the distinction between cattle of the Southeastern United States and those of a remote region in Northwestern Peru. While cows in TAG live out their days in relative confinement and security, the cattle of the Peruvian Andes (vacas) roam the alpine grasslands without a single fence in sight (or a single human being for that matter). A cow in this part of the world could easily ramble everyday of its life without ever grazing in the same place twice. Yes, the life of a Peruvian cow appears to be an exciting and enjoyable existence, but the bottoms of countless deep pits speak a very different story. Vast collections of animal bones litter the floor to create talus slopes that lay testament to the hordes of herbivores that ventured too close to commonly obscured vertical entrances. I suppose this is but another instance where the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence but of course hearty, green grass is never a substitute to remaining on the high side of a hundred footer pit. If a cow falls down a pit in a remote region in Peru and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? This demanding environment has without question bred a highly intelligent, highly aggressive, super ungulate that is ready to break the minds and the bones of any unsuspecting gringo (such as myself) that should stray into their domain.

It was our team's fourth day on the mountain and the weather had been absolutely beautiful since our arrival. I figured that it might be a good opportunity to sit in the comforts and confides of base camp and take my turn as area manager. Yes, I thought it to be a perfect day of jovial introspection but I could not have been more mistaken.

The team rolled out sometime after nine and I was left alone with only my thoughts to keep me company. I began chopping some carrots and potatoes without the faintest clue that our humble abode was being watched from afar. <trot-trot><trot-trot> I stopped my chopping with a raised eyebrow and listened. Nothing could be heard but the wind's gentle lapping on the tent's green, nylon door. I resumed my work at hand. <trot-trot> <trot-trot> This time I was convinced that I heard something, so I raced outside to see what was approaching. Nothing but an empty alpine mountainside. I walked over to our water source to ensure that we were not being robbed by the local wildlife. Still nothing but a few dragonflies skidding along the murky surface of the pond. I took a few steps back with my eyes still fixated on the pond when my glance drifted uphill. I froze in my tracks as my heart skipped several beats. There on the hillside, silhouetted on the first bench above camp, was a group of vacas. I laughed at my sudden cow-induced fear and walked back into the tent to resume chopping my carrots. After a few minutes I wandered outside for a pan when I noticed that the half dozen Peruvian cattle had scattered from their high ground and were now circling camp like a pack of hungry wolves. I knew then exactly what they wanted: water. In an alpine environment littered with caves, water becomes fairly scarce on the surface especially at such a high elevation above the valley floor. Our team's continued presence on the mountain depends crucially on this water supply as it is the only pond within several miles of camp. A single cow can drink anywhere from twenty five to fifty gallons of water in a day. Multiply that by six and you are looking at a complete liquidation (pun intended) of our entire reserve. Should these beasts quench their thirst in our pond, we would undoubtedly have to abandon our position and end our efforts on the mountain. It was my responsibility to make sure that this did not happen. Waiting for the imminent assault, I armed myself with a trek pole and a skull of my attacker's fallen brethren. "Stupid cattle," I thought, "they don't stand a chance." Wrong. Acting like a pack of dehydrated velociraptors, two cows charged the pond from opposite sides. "Very clever," I said out loud as I let loose of the cow skull. Pow! A direct hit in the forehead! Immediately one of the giant beasts put two legs on the ground and grunted loudly. Without waiting to see the reaction of the herd, I bolted straight at the second cow with a roar that echoed off the great limestone hillsides. Later I would be told that my yells could be heard all over the mountain. The cow gingerly touted away without worry as there was no way I could possibly run very fast at 14,000'. Still, I felt accomplished with my small victory, that is, until I turned to face camp. Horrified, I watched helplessly as two other invaders moved into our nylon complex. One was chewing on a piece of Andy Zellner's luggage while another was rummaging through our group tent! "Hey!" was apparently all I could muster up. The cow popped his head out of makeshift kitchen with a cascade of drool and freshly chopped carrots plopping onto the muddy ground. There would be no carrots for dinner that night... I began to run full speed but didn't travel more than fifty

feet before I was gasping for air. Again, the cow nonchalantly retreated with a trail of soiled vegetables weaving around tents and gear. Frustration immediately began to surge through my temples as I glared at our most critical water supply and I could feel myself turning red. Now there were eight members of the herd drinking and bathing in the pond. Weren't there only six?! One at a time, I chased away the disseminated interlopers while sucking down the thin alpine air. But it was of little consequence because at this point the herd was twelve strong and all were relaxing in the pond, chewing on the tents, or eating our vegetables. This is about the time that I fully understood that these cows were in complete control of *their* water source. They always had been. I then realized that these were not the absent minded cattle of TAG, these were intelligent, handpicked children of Darwin...

In addition to intellect and cleverness, there is certainly a difference in temperament between Peruvian cattle and the walking hamburgers we have in TAG. The cows we witnessed in Peru were a great deal more territorial and not afraid to attack a more or less unarmed gringo. Late in the expedition, Brian Gindling and I decided to cross the valley in an attempt to push and survey a very interesting cave that Brian had located on an earlier ridgewalk. After descending several thousand feet we began to make our way through a deep swamp littered with hidden pot holes, tangle vines, and other natural Peruvian booby traps. And of course no hell would be complete without chin high mala mujer (the Peruvian equivalent of stinging nettles that can sometimes burn for hours). Halfway across this unforgiving bog, we noticed that perhaps thirty boney vacas were watching our passage some several hundred feet away. It was not long before they all began to moo aggressively as we drifted further into their domain. Neither Brian nor I thought very much about this unusual event and continued our sluggish pace. Before we knew it, the herd had slowly encircled us and began closing the gap between themselves and their bipedal intruders. It was then that the silence was shattered by a Peruvian cattle war cry. MooooARR! I turned just in time to witness a quarter ton heifer charging straight toward me. The ground trembled as the forceful hooves of the beast trampled the marsh with a blatant distaste for gringos. Ordinarily I would have been terrified, but I was fairly over walking through a minefield of Peruvian swamp traps, stinging nettle, and yes of course the constant droning of what would ordinarily be my food supply. Without thinking I began to charge back at my attacker only to sink into waist-deep in a mixture of cow feces and mud; however this did little to deter my blood lust frenzy. I continued to yell a slur of words that most likely only made sense in my anger-saturated mind and swung my trek pole around my head much like a honda (an ancient Peruvian slingshot). The heifer's hate-filled expression evaporated instantaneously as it locked its front legs in an effort to stop short of my skull-crushing trek pole bludgeon. Its legs bored several feet into the soupy earth causing a nebulous flurry of soggy cow pies to rain

down upon my head. I expected to hear a volley of laughter coming from Brian but he, like the entourage of cattle, was silent. My attacker and I stared at each other for what seemed like an hour until I decided that it was probably safe to continue with my back turned to the once mighty dynamo. By this time the rest of the herd had wandered back to the sidelines of the quagmire to resume their cowish taunts from a safer location, but had unanimously decided not to take our invasion personally. I still remember looking back over my shoulder and seeing the overly-ambitious vaca still frozen in disbelief and undoubtedly wondering how close to blunt trauma it had come. Surely this was what was going through its head as my thoughts were running along the same lines. How close had I come to gringo kabob?

The cows of North and South America appear to be one and the same, but aside from looks, these relatives are vast differences apart. Intellect, cleverness, and temperament are some of the many characteristics that differentiate the Peruvian vaca from the TAG cow. These traits were surely nurtured from the bosom of Darwin in a land that is completely unforgiving to those who are not able to avoid deep shafts or the vicious competition from local livestock. As bluegrass music rings in the ears of many of the cows we have here in TAG, Southern hemispheric cattle nod their heads to the sounds of guitaristas, pan flutes and the gentle sound of Peruvian pop which is generally Spanish dubbed music that has a striking similarity to Michael Jackson. I image that the same is true across the world and that underneath the leather hide lies the same confused, walking hamburger that does little more than eat, sleep, and poop. Cows of Northeastern Peru, I salute you and marinate you in attention as well as with steak sauce.

