

Trade: Chinchillas

Endangered Species Handbook Segment 316

http://www.endangeredspecieshandbook.org/trade_chinchillas.php

Chinchillas, native to the high Andes, have silky, gray fur, which became very popular in the fur trade in the late 19th century. These rodents were once abundant, and early explorers reported seeing hundreds in a single day (Nowak 1991). Somewhat larger than guinea pigs, chinchilla females are heavier than males, weighing up to 800 grams (28 ounces), while males weigh about 500 grams (17.5 ounces) (Nowak 1999). They are long-lived, with records of individuals surviving to be 20 years old and reproducing until the age of 15 (Nowak 1999). Pelt hunting intensified, with exports rising to an estimated 2 million pelts between 1895 and 1900 (IUCN 1994). In 1905 alone, 217,836 pelts were imported into the United States from South America (Poland 1892). These shy animals were relentlessly pursued when they became rare, and their skins rose to \$200 per pelt; fur buyers gave instructions to agents to obtain pelts "at any price" (Allen 1942). Early in the 20th century, populations of both species—the Long-tailed (*Chinchilla laniger*) and the Short-tailed (*Chinchilla brevicaudata*) Chinchilla, collapsed. In 1910, an agreement was signed by Andean countries where the two chinchilla species occur, to prohibit capture, trade and export (IUCN 1994). Once found throughout the Andes in Peru, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, chinchillas remain highly endangered. A wild chinchilla coat sold for \$49,000 in Japan in 1981, and others have sold for as much as \$100,000 (Nowak 1999).

Wild populations of both species are now listed on CITES Appendix I, banning commercial trade. The Long-tailed Chinchilla is restricted to the Cordillera de la Costa and the Andean slopes of Chile; it has an estimated population of 5,500 in Las Chinchillas National Reserve and may occur outside the reserve (IUCN 1994). The Short-tailed Chinchilla once had the wider distribution of the two, extending from the mountains of Bolivia and Peru through Chile to northwestern Argentina, but information indicates that it is extinct in Peru and Argentina and is close to extinction in Chile and Bolivia (Thornback and Jenkins 1982; IUCN 1994). In fact, there are no recent records of the species in Lauca National Park in northern Chile, where it had previously been thought to occur, and Short-tailed Chinchillas have never been recorded in the adjoining Sajama National Park in Bolivia (Thornback and Jenkins 1982). Attempts have been made to introduce chinchillas into the wild, but without success to date (Nowak 1999).

As early as 1900, chinchillas were taken into captivity to breed for the fur trade. The International Fur Trade Federation estimates that 200,000 chinchilla pelts are produced annually, with the United States breeding the largest number; pelts sell for up to \$98 (IUCN 1994). Japan is the major market for this fur, followed by South Korea and China (IUCN 1994). The domesticated animals have been bred into different sizes and colors; they are larger than the wild species, with pelt colors ranging from gray and brown to various pastel shades (IUCN 1994). In 1994, films of genital electrocution taken on chinchilla farms resulted in a Sonoma Valley, California, farm being charged with cruelty to animals. Prosecutors documented that, according to veterinarians, the animals suffer during this process, in which the chinchilla is held upside down by the tail and electrodes are placed in the ear and in the anal canal or penis; a switch is then pulled to electrocute. According to guidelines established by the American Veterinary Medical Association, such euthanasia should be carried out only on unconscious animals.

Since ranched pelts are considered superior to wild ones, fur dealers have stated that no demand exists for wild chinchilla fur, and the government of Chile successfully proposed in 1994 that domesticated chinchillas and their fur not be covered by CITES Appendices. The *IUCN Mammal Red Data Book* stated, however, that "hunting of chinchillas still continues," and the highly endangered Short-tailed Chinchilla, whose fur is more valuable than that of the other species, was avidly pursued (Thornback and Jenkins 1982). This species has not been bred in captivity, and domestic animals represent hybrids between the two species. The *2000 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* lists the Long-tailed Chinchilla as Vulnerable, and the Short-tailed Chinchilla as Critically Endangered.

