

# Parque Nacional Huascarán, Cordillera Blanca, Peru

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THE Parque Nacional Huascarán, situated in the northern Peruvian Andes approximately 400 kilometers (240 miles) north of Lima, embraces the entire Cordillera Blanca (with the exception of the northern-most Champará massif). Of the twenty odd mountain ranges in Perú, the Cordillera Blanca is the most frequented by mountaineers and hikers and one of the most accessible. The remotest peaks are only a day and a half from the central highway which services the Callejones (Valleys) of Huaylas and Conchucos. The range includes twenty-seven *nevados* of over 6,000 meters (19,686 feet) above sea level. The highest of these is Nevado Huascarán, 6,768 meters (22,206 feet), Perú's highest peak and the fourth highest in the Western Hemisphere. Eighteen major trails cross the park from altitudes of 2,500 to 4,980 meters (8,203 to 16,339 feet).

Historically, the Callejón de Huaylas is the central area affected by the Peruvian earthquake of May 31, 1970, which claimed the lives of an estimated 67,000 persons. (*A.A.J.*, 1971, pp. 241-260). In accordance with the reconstruction of this region and with Perú's increasing concern to conserve her natural resources, the Cordillera Blanca was finally officially reserved as "Parque Nacional Huascarán" on July 1, 1975.

In 1972, John Curry Slaymaker returned to the Cordillera Blanca where he had worked as a Peace Corps volunteer with the national park project several years earlier. His intentions were innocent: a visit with old friends and a couple of months tramping in the mountains. What followed is a classic example of being in the right place at the right moment. At that time, ORDEZA, a post-earthquake governmental organization founded to rebuild the destroyed area, had budgeted \$70,000.00 for the national park project but had no one to administer it. The peg and the hole corresponded and in March, 1973, Slaymaker was appointed director. I joined forces with him in February of 1974, following two years in Huaraz as a volunteer teacher with the Benedictine Fathers in Los Pinos. Several others joined us, but our project was often dismissed as "the gringo operation" and given little importance. The Peace Corps program in Perú was discontinued, resulting in the discharge of two of our fine volunteers. Not long after, Curry and I also received curt letters of dismissal. We felt crushed and promptly began an appeal. By April of 1975, our case had been reconsidered and

we both were reinstated. Our personal futures as Peruvian government employees are uncertain, but the park's foundation is at least secured.

Parque Nacional Huascarán consists of 340,000 hectares (840,000 acres) in the northern Andean sierra of Ancash, including portions of the provinces of Recuay, Huaraz, Carhuaz, Yungay, Huaylas, Pomabamba, Mariscal Luzuriaga, Huari, Sihuas, and Bolognesi. It is 152 kilometers (92 miles) long, stretching from the Quebrada Quitaraksa (Hualanca) in the north to Nevado Rajutuna (Aquia) in the south and averages 30 kilometers (18 miles) in width. Its eastern and western borders average 4,000 meters (13,124 feet) in elevation.

Varieties of flora extend from orchids, lupines, and agave near the valley entrances to forests of quishuar and quinal, which at 4,750 meters (15,585 feet) rank among the highest in the world. Perhaps the park's most famous species is the *Puya raymondii*, or as it is known locally, "kunco." Little scientific information has been documented concerning bromeliaceous; however it is considered the world's largest inflorescence and is only found in isolated regions of Perú and Bolivia.

The fauna of the Cordillera Blanca is equally extensive, although not as easily observed as in our North American national parks. Aquatic birds, huachuas (geese) and various species of ducks, populate many of the park's 200 lakes. Terrestrial birds, partridges, humming birds, woodpeckers, hawks, and condors, among others, are frequently seen in the valleys. Among the mammals are found the puma, spectacled bear, red and gray fox, deer, vizcacha, and the vicuña, whose wool is the most valued in the world. Many of these animals appear on the World Wildlife Foundation's endangered species list.

Archaeological ruins dating from the Chavín period are scattered throughout the Cordillera Blanca. *Chullpas*, round or rectangular tower-like structures used as burial places for important persons, *huancas*, large rock pillars occasionally displaying petroglyphs, and agricultural terraces are the most commonly found. The term "Chavín" itself refers to the style, period, and site at Chavín de Huantar located east of the Cordillera Blanca in the Callejón de Conchucos on the Mosna River. This culture is considered the matrix of the Peruvian-Bolivian civilizations.

The Central Park Office, located in Huaraz on Avenida Centenario No 912, in the Dirección Regional del Ministerio de Agricultura, is the center for all climbing and hiking information in the park. For visitor protection, registration is required for all backpacking and climbing activity. Party leaders are required to register their party members prior to each outing and complete a visit summary upon returning. While this may appear a troublesome requirement, it has proven an invaluable orientation to numerous climbing and trekking parties.

At this time, it is impossible to provide a timely rescue service in the Cordillera Blanca. Climbers climb at their own risk and in the event

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*Photo by Cary Slaymaker*

**Vicuña in Andean Sierra. Along with the guanaco, the vicuña is on the verge of extinction.**



of an accident must be prepared to evacuate injured party members without outside assistance. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that each climbing party have four members. All should have considerable experience climbing on rock, snow, and ice, and be familiar with mountain rescue techniques.

Easy access to the Cordillera Blanca presents the special danger of pulmonary edema during or after rapid ascent into the mountains without proper acclimatization. Every climber must be knowledgeable of the symptoms and treatment of edema conditions. (*A.A.J.*, 1961, pp. 420-422 and *A.A.J.*, 1972, pp. 83-92). Three other medical problems are also prevalent: frostbite, dysentery, and hepatitis. The danger of frostbite can be great at high altitudes. Above 6,000 meters (19,686 feet) temperatures are often below  $-23^{\circ}$  C. ( $0^{\circ}$  F.) and freezing temperatures occur at 4,000 meters (13,124 feet). The new alpine approach on difficult routes often includes several bivouacs. Frostbite is becoming more of a hazard as a result. (*A.A.J.*, 1962, pp. 1-26). To avoid dysentery and hepatitis, all doubtful water should be boiled or treated with tincture of iodine. Be selective in choosing locally prepared foods. Consult your physician concerning medications and possible inoculations before travelling.

Finally, I would recommend that all visitors to the Cordillera Blanca request information prior to departing. The following references might be useful:

*Maps:* 1. Carta Nacional del Perú, 1:100,000; Hojas: 19 h Carhuaz, 19 i Huari, 20 i Recuay, 18 h Corongo, 21 i Chiquián

These maps are distributed exclusively by: Instituto Geográfico Militar, Avda. Andrés Balmori, No 1198, Apartado 2038, Lima 34, Perú.

2. Cordillera Blanca (Perú), Parte Sur, 1:100,000, 1939, German Alpine Club (copies available).
3. Cordillera Blanca (Perú), Parte Norte, 1932, 1:100,000, German Alpine Club, (Out of print).
4. Nevado Huascarán, Cordillera Blanca, Perú, 1:25,000, 1964, Instituto cartográfico Freytag-Berndt y Artaria, Vienna.
5. Map of the Northern Cordillera Blanca, Perú; Alpmayo region, Ricker and Holdsworth, *A.A.J.*, 1971, pp. 263-265.

*Literature:* *Cordillera Blanca*, H. Kinzl and E. Schneider, Innsbruck, Austria, 1950. 168 pages.

*Revista Peruana de Andinismo y Glaciología*, César Morales Arnao, Director, Redacción Calle Hernando de Soto 250, Salamanca de Monterrico, Lima 3, Perú.

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