

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 feet while staring at the orange nylon innards of my tent after waking from a lucid nightmare with cold sweats. I had awoken from a deep and troubled sleep where I was endlessly being chased by a herd of wild and angry cattle 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 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 venture too close to the sometimes obscured vertical entrances. I suppose this is but another instance where the grass is greener on the other side of the fence but of course, good, hearty, green grass is never a substitute for remaining on the high side of a hundred foot pit. If a cow falls down a hundred foot 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.

It was our team's fourth day on the mountain and the weather had been absolutely beautiful since our



Andy Zellner climbs out of El Hodago. Mike Green

arrival. This particular day proved to be no different. I figured that it might be a good opportunity to sit in the comforts and confines 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 lapping at the green, nylon door of the group tent. I resumed my work at hand. <trot-trot> <trot-trot> 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. I took a few steps back towards the makeshift kitchen when I happened to glance uphill. I froze in my tracks as my heart skipped a beat. There on the hillside, silhouetted on the first bench above camp, was a herd of Peruvian cattle. 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 a half-dozen Peruvian cattle circling the camp like a pack of wolves. I knew then exactly



Brian Gindling prepares for battle with an ill-tempered Peruvian cow. Mike Green

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 between twenty-five to fifty gallons of water in a day. Multiple that by six and you are looking at a complete liquidation (pun intended) of our drinking water. 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. I armed myself with a trekking pole and a cow skull and waited for the imminent assault. "Stupid cattle," I thought, "they don't stand a chance." Wrong again. Acting like a pack of dehydrated velociraptors, two cows charged the pond from opposite sides. "Very clever," I said out loud as I threw the skull of their fallen brethren. Pow! 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 far at 14,000 feet. Still, I felt accomplished with my small victory 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 its head out of the group tent 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 I was not 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. Now there were eight members of the herd drinking and bathing in the pond. Weren't there only six?! One at a time, I would chase away the interlopers while simultaneously sucking down the thin alpine air only to look depressingly back at our breeched tent city. 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 and not ours. They always were, and furthermore, 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 temperament difference 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 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 bony cows were watching our passage some several hundred feet away. It was not long before they all began mooing aggressively as we drifted further into their domain. Neither Brian or I thought very much about this unusual event and continued at our sluggish pace. Before we knew it, the herd 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 spent after 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 my attacker only to sink waist-deep into a mixture of



Muleskinner Himay. Tony Theriault



The final resting place for one of the most ferocious predators of the Andes, *Bos primigenius*.

Mike Green

cow feces and mud; however this did little to deter my blood lust frenzy. I continued yelling a slur of words that most likely only made sense in my anger-saturated mind and swung my trekking pole around my head much like a honda (an ancient Peruvian slingshot). The cow'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 raining 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 my way back to the once mighty dynamo. By this time the rest of the herd had wandered back to the sidelines of the swamp to resume their cowish taunts from a safer location, and had unanimously decided not to take our invasion personally. I still remember

looking back to see the overly-ambitious cow 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 to “gringo kabob” did I come?

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 guitarristas, pan flutes, and the gentle sound of Peruvian pop, which is generally Spanish dubbed music that we in America nodded our heads to during the 1980s.

I imagine that the same is true across the world and that underneath the leather hide lies the same confused, walking hamburger that does nothing more than eat, sleep, and poop. Cows of Northeastern Peru, I salute you and marinate you in attention as well as with steak sauce. 🍷