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# The first effective reserve in the Somuncurá Plateau

How WLT's Buy an Acre programme is helping FH&D to create a protected area in Argentinian Patagonia



# The first effective reserve in the Somuncurá Plateau



## Country

Argentina

## Partner/Organisation

Fundación Hábitat y Desarrollo (FH&D)

## Biome

Temperate grasslands, savannas and shrublands

## Ecoregion

Patagonian Steppe

## Habitats

Set within Argentina's Río Negro province, Somuncurá ('the rock that sounds or speaks' in Mapuche language) is a basalt plateau part of the vast Patagonian Steppe. Shrublands dominate the habitats protected through this WLT partner project, interspersed with a mixture of grassland and scrub as well as rocky outcrops, streams and hot springs home to endemic life.

## Project summary

Classified as a crucial area for biodiversity in general, and birds and extinction-facing species in particular, the conservation value of Patagonia's Somuncurá Plateau is considerable – but so are the dangers it faces. In recent decades, unsustainable land use and invasive species have combined to threaten the unique life in these habitats, pushing a wealth of highly threatened, endemic species to the brink of extinction. With help from donations to WLT's Buy an Acre programme, this project by partner FH&D will aim to safeguard these species by creating the first privately protected reserve the Somuncurá Plateau has ever seen. An initial property of 4,725 ha (11,675 acres) will be protected, including a small number of streams that are the only known home of the flagship project species – the Critically Endangered and micro-endemic amphibian El Rincon Stream Frog. Project funds will then cover the initial costs of managing the reserve over its first three years.

## Main threats to the area

The presence of unmanaged livestock is the top danger facing the Somuncurá Plateau: it creates competition for water sources in this Patagonian landscape, as well as resulting in the seeding of grasses as feed and the persecution of native predators (Puma or the fox species known as Culpeo) and native browsers seen as rivals for cattle and sheep (Guanaco). The widespread killing of resident predators – and subsequent increase in livestock numbers – has led to the loss of habitat and biodiversity at Somuncurá. This unsustainable use of natural resources has been compounded by pressure from invasive species: on land, feral pigs have been known to destroy the riparian habitat while in the main streams of the plateau, the introduction of a top predator (the Rainbow Trout) and a strong competitor (the Uruguay Tetra) has caused a rapid decline of endemic and threatened aquatic species.

## Global prioritisation

The reserve being created with help from donations to WLT's Buy an Acre programme will protect habitats within the pre-existing Área Natural Protegida Provincial Meseta de Somuncurá, recognised as a Key Biodiversity Area, an Important Bird Area and a priority site by the Alliance for Zero Extinction.

## Puma



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## El Rincon Stream Frog



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## Naked Characin



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## UN Sustainable Development Goals directly advanced by this project

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



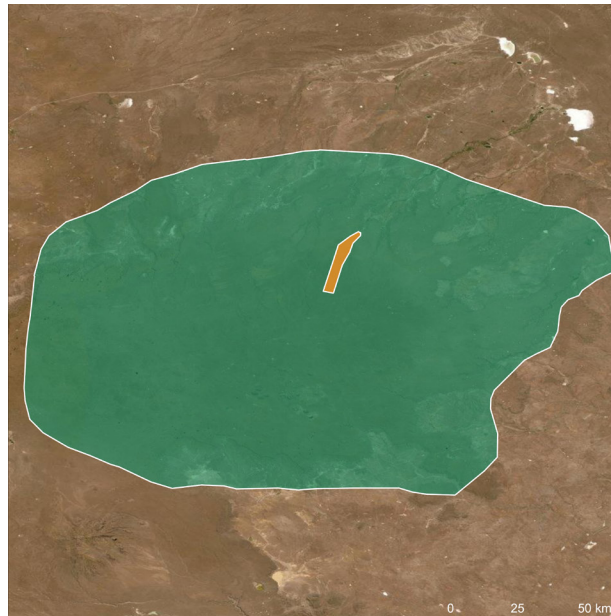
15 LIFE ON LAND



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

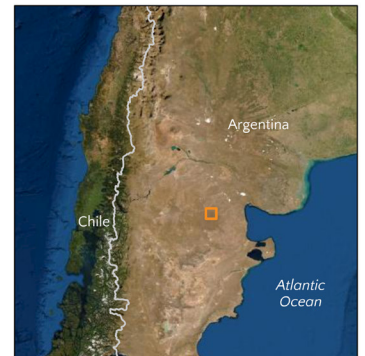


<sup>1</sup>The Red List of Threatened Species, maintained by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), includes categories of Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), Vulnerable (VU), Near Threatened (NT) and Least Concern (LC).



Orange square: WLT-funded property

Green square: Somuncurá Plateau



## Key species<sup>1</sup>

Somuncurá's predators and browsers range from Puma (*Puma concolor*, LC) to Culpeo foxes (*Lycalopex culpaeus*, LC) and Guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*, LC). Meanwhile, resident endemic species include El Rincon Stream Frog (*Pleurodema somuncurens*, CR) and Naked Characin (*Gymnocharacinus bergii*, CR); lizard species *Phymaturus somuncurens* (LC), *Liolaemus telsen* (LC), *Liolaemus petrophilus* (LC) and *Liolaemus somuncurae* (LC); Southern Viscacha (*Lagidium viscacia somuncuriensis*, LC); Laguna Raymunda Frog (*Atelognathus reverberii*, VU); and endemic freshwater snails *Pothamolithus valchetensis* and *Pothamolithus elenae*.

## Biodiversity

Like many other plateaus around the globe, Somuncurá has developed a wealth of unique life over its natural history. The overall landscape hosts endemic lizard species (see 'Key species' for more information) and a small chinchilla species, while the isolated lagoons up in the high plateau are home to the also-endemic Laguna Raymunda Frog. Meanwhile, the Valcheta Stream – fed by the hot springs that emerge from the plateau's rocky edge, which confer year-round warmth to the waters even when outside temperatures plummet below freezing – has enabled the evolution of endemic species. Valcheta residents include the El Rincon Stream Frog, a species part of Zoological Society of London's TOP 100 EDGE worldwide ranking of extinction-facing amphibians; the Naked Characin, a symbolic species in Argentina that was a declared Natural Monument in the Río Negro province; and two endemic freshwater snails currently being assessed by the IUCN Red List and likely to be Critically Endangered.

## Local communities

In an area of scarce human settlements but extensive sheep and cattle ranching, uncontrolled movement of livestock into habitats has led to human-wildlife conflict. To ensure human activities are compatible with the conservation of endangered life, one of FH&D's priorities will be to fence areas of the new reserve to prevent further damage to sensitive areas and begin recovery.

## Partner/Organisation

This is WLT's first project with FH&D, an organisation with 11 years of experience in conserving habitats in Argentina. Their work includes the creation of new reserves through both land purchase and legal declarations, and habitat management, restoration and invasive species removal. FH&D work collaboratively with a number of other organisations and stakeholders in the region including Fundacion Somuncurá, who will be responsible for implementing activities in the region.

World Land Trust, Blyth House, Bridge Street, Halesworth, IP19 8AB, Suffolk UK  
Tel: 01986 874422 | Email: info@worldlandtrust.org

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