

WHY ALPACAS?

by Dr. Ian Davison, Illawarra Alpacas, Cambewarra, NSW

Alpacas? Why alpacas? you say. Isn't that just another sunrise, boom and bust primary industry, run by accountants for CBD professionals with a four wheel drive and a pair of moleskins?

The answer is a resounding no! The Australian alpaca industry is a mature, well organised, and rapidly developing primary industry, one that has developed an amazing degree of infrastructure and organisation since the first alpacas entered the country in 1988. It now boasts an organisation, the Australian Alpaca Association (AAA), founded in 1990 which today represents over 2300 members and 1800 registered herds across every state of Australia, with 14 regional committees meeting regularly across the nation.

Its list of achievements in 14 years is as impressive as it is progressive. The AAA sponsors a biennial national seminar, with overseas guest speakers. It publishes a colour magazine, *Alpacas Australia*, three times a year, as well as a regular national newsletter for its members. It administers the International Alpaca Register (IAR), tracing the pedigrees of registered alpacas back to the foundation stock. It has designed and is implementing an Across-herd Genetic Evaluation (AGE) program, linked to the IAR, to accelerate genetic improvement in the Australian alpaca. It has negotiated strategic partnerships with the New Zealand Alpaca Association to strengthen our industry in the international market.

It has commissioned an independent and professional report by ACIL (2001) on the viability of the Australian Alpaca industry to strengthen its members position with the Australian Taxation Office. It established a Strategic Development Task Force which has produced the Vision 2020 report on the status, direction and future opportunities for the industry over the next twenty years. It has engaged marketing consultants to oversee the strategic marketing and promotion of the breed to the public. It conducts an annual National Show and Sale, now in its 11th year, to showcase the industry to primary producers and to the Australian and international public. It conducts an annual fleece sampling survey to benchmark the Australian herd. It has established Australian Alpaca Fibre Ltd (AAFL) to receive, class and sell Australian alpaca fibre, and has developed strategic

commercial partnerships with purchasers of alpaca fleece and manufacturers of alpaca products. It administers a comprehensive web page encompassing online registration of matings, births and transfers, access to the IAR register, a members message board and discussion page, educational material, reports on National Committee meetings, show rules and results, breed standards, AAA regulations, a breeder directory, industry news, and a business plan.

This busy agenda reflects the expectations and demands of its growing membership, and an Australian herd of nearly 60,000 registered alpacas. Australian breeders have exported alpacas to New Zealand, Canada, USA, Britain, China, South Africa and Germany.

Alpacas are no longer a sunrise industry. Fifteen years on, the industry need no longer respond to predictions of boom and bust. Alpacas are here to stay.

Still, I hear you repeat, why alpacas?

Well, there are so many answers, it is difficult to suggest just one.

In the context of the "sea changers", the answer is that you don't need a broad-acre farm to get established in the alpaca industry. Nor do you need a herd of 100 alpacas to be taken seriously, either within the industry or by the tax department. The average Australian herd is only about 20 animals, and with prices ranging from a few thousand to fifty thousand dollars for a breeding female, and anything from a thousand to \$150,000 for a stud male, new buyers can choose their entry level in terms of both numbers and quality.

Buying an alpaca is not like buying a Merino sheep. The wool industry in Australia has a 200 year history of accumulated knowledge and breeding, and a new sheep breeder has a lot of catching up to do, with many older breeders boasting several generations of experience. In alpacas, the most venerable Australian breeders have less than twenty years of knowledge and experience, and it is estimated that today's alpaca has realized only about 60% of its potential genetic productivity. The book of Australian alpaca knowledge has yet to be written. Any alpaca breeder, starting today, can aspire to make a contribution to that book.



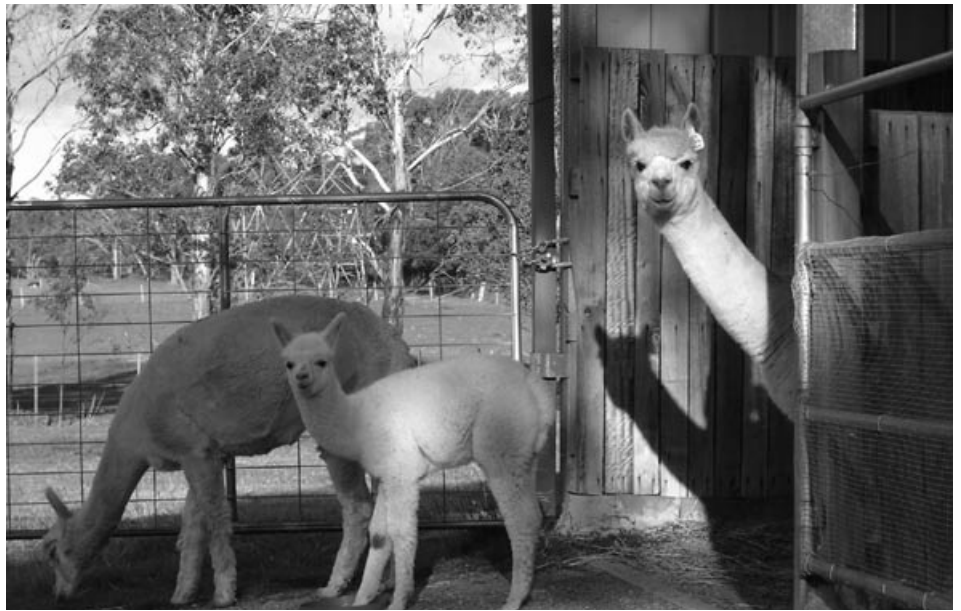
Meanwhile, back on the farm, what advantages do alpacas offer? Well, for a start, they are what we often designate "designer green." Their soft, padded feet are gentle on fragile Australian soils, a huge advantage over traditional Australian livestock, including sheep, cattle, goats, pigs and horses. They are approximately 30% more efficient in extracting nutrition from pasture than sheep, and do well on native grasses as well as improved pasture. They are, like their camel cousins, able to withstand dry conditions for longer than other livestock. They do not graze pasture as low as sheep, and are thereby less likely to render land vulnerable to erosion. They use communal dung piles, to which they return to urinate and defaecate, and are therefore less prone to develop worm problems than sheep or cattle in comparable paddocks. Their fleece is very low in oil (lanolin), and they are therefore rarely affected by fly-strike. They do not require mulesing or crutching like sheep. They usually give birth during the first few hours of sunlight, when cria (babies) are least likely to succumb to cold or predators. They are very social animals with strong herd instincts, and their protective behaviour has been adapted to their common use as herd guardians in protecting flocks of sheep from predation by foxes. They are long lived (up to 20 years), and females are frequently fertile for up to 15 years. Finally, they are naturally curious and sociable animals, easily herded and handled, respectful of normal fencing, and requiring no specialized handling equipment.

But there's more! It is no coincidence that the Australian alpaca industry is strongly represented by women, who are frequently the stud managers of the herds. It is not patronizing to women to say that alpacas are animals which lend themselves better than almost any other to handling and management by women,

without the need for physical size or strength to achieve one's objectives. Alpacas have a nature that is curious, but usually very gentle, and rarely confronting, and they respond favourably to gentle handling and treatment.

There is one more major advantage to alpacas, one of common interest to all breeders, whether they are serious stud breeders, commercial breeders, or just interested in showing this enchanting and captivating animal.

That's lifestyle. Talk to any alpaca breeder, whether they have two or two hundred alpacas, and you will instantly sense their passion about the animals, and their commitment to the industry. It's contagious. In such a young industry, there is so much to discover, so much to learn, and there are so many opportunities to be taken. The country lifestyle, the shows, the seminars, the auctions, the farm visits, and the industry occasions: all are a part of the social fabric that is "breeding alpacas". It includes the friendships with a diverse range of people with equally diverse backgrounds and interests, bonded by



the common enthusiasm they hold for alpacas. Whether we start life as electricians, judges, farmers, milkmen, nurses, business executives, doctors, soldiers, sailors, politicians, plumbers, vets or vandals, there is a place and a role for us in the alpaca industry.

Try a sea change. See the change. Get into alpacas, and join the adventure.

About the author: Ian Davison is a practising orthopaedic surgeon, living in Cambewarra, near Nowra NSW, where he and wife, Harriet, and sister-in-law, Celia Cook, run Illawarra Alpacas. Their herd, now numbering almost 400 alpacas, was started in 1992, and has featured prominently in major shows and promotions since their first supreme championship in 1997.

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