

IN SEARCH OF A SEA CHANGE

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So you have paid off the kids' education and resolved the repercussions of the first spouse. Hope has triumphed over experience, and you are comfortably entrenched in another relationship. You have sold your business interests well, cashed in your Sydney home for a sum that seems obscene, settled your mortgage, rolled over your super, and retired from the rat race.

You are feeling pretty pleased with yourself. You are cashed up, secure, and looking for a sea change.

You trawled Europe on a shoestring and a wink 30 years ago, and are now too used to the good life to contemplate carrying anything heavier than a shirt on your back. The distant bugle, whose plaintiff refrain once beckoned you to explore exciting and unknown shores, now sounds an alarm that alerts you to threats of terror on even the familiar ones. Australia is looking secure, comfortable, predictable, affordable, warm, familiar, and more suited to your phlegmatic disposition. Did I mention affordable?

You have done the trip around Australia in the campervan, but baulked at the driveway to the retirement village. Fishing, surfing and golf are great in your time off, but hardly justify a purposeful awakening each morning, and a hearty meal and a well-earned sleep at the end of the day. The holiday house is great for seven days, but boring after eight.

What now?

The country life beckons: clean air, the wide open spaces, and only the wind in the trees and the lowing of the cattle to disturb your thoughts. The freedom to get down and dirty. Where clothes, like wine, get better with age, and fashion is measured by the number of holes in your work hat. Where you can talk about the weather with a solemnity that invokes awe and respect amongst sunbathing suburban folk, and the problems of international markets, plague locusts and drought seem somehow more real and immediate than those of the real estate market, peak hour traffic and water restrictions. The price of a modest weatherboard home on a hundred acres makes the sale of your city property look even more obscene, and already you are feeling the warm inner glow of being a landholder and primary producer, feeding the nation.

Hang on. Producing what? Well, the last bloke ran a few thousand sheep and some beef cattle, so that'll do. Mind you, he subdivided his 2000 acres to sell you your 100 acres,

and although the fences are OK and you have a few sheds, he still has the cattle yards. He seemed to make a living off his 2000 acres. Still, his lifestyle has never been so good since he sold off a few 100 acre lots. Seems he's playing a bit more golf and bowls these days, and has lost interest in trying to make a quid from farming.

*Come to think of it, what **can** you run on 100 acres? 80 fine wool sheep? 50 fat lambs? lambs? 10 breeding cows? A partridge in a pear tree? How can you make a living out of that? What will the taxman have to say about your business plan? And how long do you intend to keep working your investment? "Till it's all gone" as the joke goes?*

*So you sell up, move into a modest apartment back in the city, join the local bowling club, play bridge on Wednesdays, and read *Town and Country Farmer* on the weekends, contemplating what might have been.*

Sound familiar? It is a road travelled by many middle-aged retirees, if not in *fact*, then at least notionally, when they pull out of the rat race and dream about a life in the country. *But it doesn't have to remain a dream.* For many, there has been a real transformation, a real sea change, which sees their dream become a reality. How?

Alpacas.

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, employing 6 people, and today housed in its own wholly-owned million dollar premises in Melbourne. The AAA today represents over 2300 members and 1800 registered herds across every state of the Commonwealth, 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.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AAA

- Ownership of AAA offices and building
- International Alpaca Registry
- Across-herd Genetic Evaluation program
- Alpacas Australia magazine
- AAA Newsletter
- AAA web site
- Online registration
- Australian Alpaca Fibre Limited
- Strategic industry partnerships
- Strategic cooperation with NZAA
- Annual National Show and Sale
- ACIL Alpaca Industry Viability report (2001)
- Strategic Development Task Force Vision 2020 report (2003)
- Annual Fleece Sampling Survey
- Appointment of National Marketing consultants
- Draft certificate course in Agriculture (Alpaca Management)
- National guidelines for showing and judging of alpacas

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 (one recently sold in the USA for \$US400,000), 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. It seems unlikely that the new entrant to the wool industry can ever hope to catch up, let alone make an impact on the industry or a major contribution to industry development. 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

But internationally, Australia starts with a significant advantage. That, in part, is the country’s proud record in the Merino wool industry. Two hundred years ago, Australians imported the Spanish-bred Merino sheep, adapted it to the Australian climate and pasture, and created an industry that is, today, unassailably the standard for world’s best practice. In the process, Australia has also accumulated the world’s greatest experience and knowledge in the care, husbandry and breeding of fibre-bearing animals, and applied to the industry the scientific method and research of its internationally recognized veterinarians and agricultural scientists. Today, Australia has the largest national herd of alpacas to be found outside of South America. This is the same country that has the world’s greatest understanding and experience in the production of wool for commercial textiles.

If this is not reason enough for optimism, consider that Australia enjoys a status in the world of being relatively disease-free, with a stable government and economy, free of entrenched political corruption, and has well established trade links to Asia, Europe and North America by sea and air. For any country looking to import alpacas, Australia is destined to become the preferred starting point. The foresight of the AAA in establishing a national program for accelerated genetic improvement (the AGE), linked to a pedigree register that embraces the vast majority of Australian alpacas, will guarantee for Australia “favoured nation” status in the international industry.

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. Their perianal skin is free of fleece, and they do not therefore require mulesing or crutching like sheep. They have adapted their reproductive system to the high altitude of the South American Andes, and usually give birth during the first few hours of sunlight, when cria (babies) are least likely to succumb to cold or predators (pumas). 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. They are rarely a threat to women, children or infants, and most women can undertake all the tasks related to their care and husbandry without difficulty, and without danger to attendant infants and children.

OK, so alpacas are environmentally friendly animals, with high intrinsic value, easily managed by one or two handlers without unnecessary force, suitable for small farms, requiring no highly specialised or expensive infrastructure, suitable for primary producers with little or no prior livestock experience, with significant commercial potential. They are safe with children, and come in a range of designer colours. Is that it?

Well, just about. But 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. Those friendships

extend internationally as much as they do interstate, with the option to travel across Australia and overseas on alpaca business, building relationships and exploring new opportunities. It is an industry for everyone, with opportunities for all, and every new entrant brings with them into the industry insights, expertise and experiences from other walks of life, all of which have some part to play in building the industry. And that enthusiasm is reflected in the involvement of breeders, old and new, in the committee structure at regional and national level, all making their contribution to the future Book on the Australian Alpaca. 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.

I frequently explain to new investors: *Time passes. Read a book, play golf, sail the ocean, sleep, watch TV, or collect butterflies. But rest assured, time **will** pass. Better to spend it on an adventure that is fun, educational, constructive, pioneering, and lucrative, and may one day provide jobs for your children and export dollars for your country, than to squander it on meaningless indulgences or fruitless enterprises.*

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.

BUYING THE BEACH HOUSE” ...on making the seachange

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It's Saturday morning, and you're up just early enough to avoid the accusation of having slept in. You're dealing with the repercussions of a tough week at work, and your head tells you that last night was a big night out. A Big Night Out, you repeat, as if to confirm your suspicions. You settle on the patio with a latte and a copy of the latest Town and Country Farmer to soak up the morning sunshine and rehabilitate the brain, conscious of the fact that, although the weekend has just begun, next week is already looming large on the horizon.

The coffee is balm to the soul, the weather's perfect, and a gentle breeze bears the faint but tantalising scent of salt air and the beckoning call of the beach. But for the certain promise of another Monday morning, life seems perfect. But the tedium and angst of another week in a job that has long since lost its purpose and direction, where survival has supplanted excitement as the reason for turning up, and where the only place for creativity is in making up new excuses, the most exquisite coffee is no longer enough to soothe the troubled soul.

Town and Country Farmer followed you home from your recent visit to the doctor's surgery. It was your compensation for having spent over an hour in the waiting room, only to be told that you have high blood pressure, for which you have to take small doses of expensive poisons for the rest of your life. Fifty dollars, please. And, oh, untreated, it is a high risk factor for fatal heart disease. Do Not Pass Go. (It wasn't high when I arrived, you snarled quietly on the way out, affecting a state of distraction contrived to be your defence should the dominatrix at the desk reclaim the magazine before you made good your escape).

*Thumbing through the magazine, you look for an article just long enough to take you through to the end of your latte, when a photo catches your eye. It's of a bloke carrying a baby alpaca, with two larger alpacas whose expression declares their vested interest. The article is titled **In Search of a Seachange**, and whilst it's longer than you had intended, it strikes a cord, so you lean back, put your feet up on another chair, take in the first draft of the perfect latte, and settle back in the sunshine for a quick read.*

*Two hours later, and your mind is racing. You read the article, and it seemed to be talking to you. You read the ad placed by the Australian Alpaca Association. You read the next article titled **Wouldn't You Rather be Farming Alpacas**, and look over your shoulder wondering if someone is setting you up. Your interest and excitement rises as you read more alpaca articles on the National Show and Sale, and the elite Alpacaganza auction to be held in November, and you soak up the articles on alpaca twins and the use of alpacas as herd guardians. Craving for more, you read every one of the ads, and then move on to the article on electric fencing, wondering if it works with alpacas. You go back and take another look over the photos, and long to get your arms around one of*

these enchanting and regal animals, and to run your fingers through that impossibly sensuous fleece.

*You're gone. Hooked. **Sucked in**, as your kids will later tell you. Never touched one, but already your mind has moved on, and you've become a part of the seachange. Contrary to expectations, your partner's initial trepidation when she discovers you deep in contemplation on the patio turns quickly to almost childlike enthusiasm. The speed of her conversion is disconcerting, and is even more sudden and unqualified than your own, with chaotic and expansive scenarios racing in all directions, and before you know it, it's after midday, and you're both sitting on the patio in your bath robes, the half finished latte now cold, pens and pads recording notes and numbers, and the **Sydney Morning Herald** in glorious disarray as you trawl the property pages seeking a new harbour to anchor your seachange.*

The changed mood is palpable. Monday seems a lifetime away. The Big Night Out has lifted, and is but a distant memory of a previous life. The inertia, indolence and indulgence of another sunny Sydney weekend has exploded, and there is instead a bewildering sense of urgency, excitement and uncertainty

You have embarked upon your seachange.

What happens now is a turbulent ride through previously uncharted waters, but for one previously becalmed and at the mercy of currents over which you exercised no control, the future journey is exciting, driven, purposeful and full of challenges.

How best to navigate the waters and seek safe harbour?

For all new entrants to the steadily growing and developing alpaca industry, the problems and the challenges are many, and the solutions complex. But always remember Davison's Law: *Whoever said that getting there was half the fun was only half right. Getting there is **all** the fun.* It is the journey, and not the destination, that is the adventure.

Perhaps the first stop should be the accountant, and the second the real estate agent. Get a handle on your net worth, the implications of taking an earlier retirement, the value and treatment of your superannuation, and the potential asset base available to you to fund your seachange. Decide where you wish to drop your anchor, realising that alpacas are found across a wide range of climates, from subalpine to semiarid, temperate to tropical, and are represented in every state of Australia. Essentially, alpacas will make their home wherever you choose to live, and there will be local breeders in whatever clime you choose who will be willing to welcome and advise you, and to share their experience with you.

Your choice of a property on which to start your adventure in the alpaca industry is like buying the beachhouse. Your choice will be governed by a host of factors, principal amongst them affordability, lifestyle opportunities, size, and access to amenities, but including also proximity to existing friends and family, services, climate, ease of access

from major urban centres, and development opportunities. But wherever it is, you have to love it, *because it is a major part of the lifestyle and the adventure*, and the alpacas are just another part of the same adventure which gives purpose and direction to the lifestyle.

Having chosen your “harbour”, you need next to identify existing local breeders, to whom all the advantages and disadvantages of your choice will already be apparent from first-hand experience. If the locals cannot direct you to them, go to the website of the Australian Alpaca Association (<http://www.alpaca.asn.au/index.shtml>), and follow the prompts under Breeders’ Directory to find the names, addresses and phone numbers of members of the association who will be your future neighbours. Try to visit or talk to them all, and take advantage of their enthusiasm and expertise.

As early as possible, you will need to formulate your business plan. Whatever you decide, accept that it will likely change as you go along, but the exercise is still of fundamental importance. Perhaps most important is to decide where you wish to position yourself in the industry, as the decision will have major implications for you in terms of taxation, risk, and potential income. For example, the average herd size is still only between 10 and 20 animals, and even at that size, there are some who put themselves forward as studs with top end elite (and expensive!) animals, and others who have alpacas as farm pets, or incidental to a more mixed farming enterprise. Others wish simply to breed and sell off progeny each year, whilst others may be looking to build up a herd of relatively inexpensive alpacas to be shorn annually, with an income stream drawn from fleece and the sale of the occasional animal. Some alpacas are owned and treated simply as pets, whilst others are bought purely as herd guardians by broadacre sheep farmers to protect their flocks from foxes. Be sure where you want to go with your animals before starting to make your strategic purchases.

Once you are living on your property, invest immediately in a couple of wethers to get experience in handling and managing the animals. These can usually be purchased for around five hundred dollars each, and sometimes less, and can give you valuable experience in developing your management skills without risking your superannuation. Equally, it is too irresistible to neglect the purchase of a cheap pregnant female, even if it doesn’t fit your longer term objectives, just for the excitement and experience of managing a pregnant female through to the birth of your first cria (baby alpaca). Such a female is likely to be older (perhaps eight to ten years old), and with less desirable fleece (coarse fibre, low fleece weights, mixed colour), but should be an experienced and proven mother of four or more successful pregnancies, in order to lessen the likelihood of mishaps through the 11 ½ months gestation, the delivery, and the next 6 months to weaning.

Typically, new entrants to the industry are hungry for information and education, and soak up new information like black holes. Fortunately, the industry is highly structured and organised in developing and disseminating such information, and older stakeholders in the industry are typically irrepressible enthusiasts who take great pleasure in sharing their knowledge with newcomers.

As soon as the decision has been taken to “get into alpacas”, seachangers should acquaint themselves with the treasure chest of information available on the AAA website (see above), and join the association (Australian Alpaca Association, PO Box 1076, Mitcham North, Victoria 3132) to be kept informed of industry events, shows, sales, and new industry initiatives. A colour magazine is published three times a year, augmented by a national newsletter between issues, and forwarded to all members. A National Show and Sale is conducted annually in November, and is the premiere event of the calendar. A national seminar is conducted every two years, with papers pitched to both new and established breeders.

Rural Training Units in Alpaca Management have been drafted, and will soon be accessible through the Rural Training Council of Australia. Some TAFE courses have already been established.

There is an extensive library of material on alpaca matters accessible to members through the AAA, as well as a bibliography of alpaca publications. The AAA also publishes *Alpaca Notes*, a series of educational monographs on alpaca husbandry downloadable from the website. There is also a Message / Discussion Board accessible to members through the AAA website, with a long history of archived postings on a wide range of husbandry, political and commercial considerations.

The regional infrastructure of the AAA also promotes industry development and education through a range of open days, seminars, workshops, regional meetings, displays and shows, and new members should involve themselves in as many regional activities as they can, to expand their knowledge and network. These days are frequently great social occasions, as well as business and learning opportunities, and the friends made through industry participation are one of the great strengths of the alpaca industry, where every new entrant has skills and experiences that will enable him to contribute uniquely towards the strength and success of the industry.

Once you have decided where you want to start your alpaca enterprise, it is probably worth seeking some advice from a local agronomist regarding the vegetation and soils on your property, how they might be improved and the supply and reliability of water. A visit to the local vets may be prudent to discover their familiarity and experience with alpacas, and any advice that may be particularly relevant to your region (eg. existence of possible threats like dingos, liver fluke or endophytes).

You can get away with surprisingly little infrastructure when you start, good fencing and holding pens being the bare minimum. But soon you will accumulate all the tools that will make your management easier and more enjoyable, ranging from yards and shearing sheds to four-wheel bikes, alpaca trailers, portable fencing panels, alpaca management software, and a growing library of books and articles. Use your alpaca colleagues to help you in your selection of plant and equipment.

Remember, always, that there is noone farming alpacas in Australia today that knew any more about them 20 years ago than you know today: *ziti*. Furthermore, it won't take you

20 years to progress yourselves to the same level of knowledge and expertise, thanks to their accumulated records and experiences over the past 15 years. Make no mistake: we are only just starting the alpaca industry in Australia, and already have the biggest registered national herd outside South America, and have exported Australian alpacas to Asia, Europe, Africa and North America. Any new entrant to the industry today will be a foundation contributor to what is destined to be a major Australian agrarian enterprise.

Now, how's that for a seachange?