



## **Australian Alpacas**

### **Origin**

Alpacas are part of the camelid family - that is, they are related to camels. There are four species, which constitute the group of South American Camelidae. They are the Llama (*Lama glama*), Alpaca (*Lama pacos* or *Vicugna pacos*), Vicuna (*Vicugna vicugna*) and the Guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*).

They originate from South America, with the largest herds located in the high altitude regions of Southern Peru, Bolivia and Chile known as the Altiplano. Life here is difficult. Alpacas not only battle a harsh climate - burning sun by day and freezing conditions at night - but also receive few of the benefits of modern animal husbandry.

Alpacas were first imported into Australia in 1858, but the project failed and none of the alpaca are known to have survived. The first of the current alpaca arrived in Australia in 1988. The Australian alpaca herd has since been built from breeding stock imported from Chile and, more recently, from Peru. The alpaca has adapted well to Australian climatic conditions.

Today, in Australia there are approximately 25,000 alpacas. These are owned by some 1,600 breeders and have a combined livestock value of over \$100 million.

While the future direction of the Australian alpaca industry is the promotion and sale of alpaca fibre, the emphasis in this young industry will be on breeding for the foreseeable future.

### **Alpaca classes**

Cria	from birth to weaning
Weaners	from weaning (approximately 4-5 months) to 12 months
Tuis	from 12 months to 24 months
Hembras	adult females
Machos	adult males

### **Alpaca breeds**

There are two types of alpaca, the Huacaya and the Suri.

#### **Huacaya**

This is the most common alpaca type in South America and Australia. The huacaya has a bonnet of wool on its head. The dense body wool grows straight out from the body. Ideally, fleece coverage is even and extends down the legs. The degree of crimp varies, generally increasing with fleece density.

#### **Suri**

As a type Suris are very much less common than Huacayas and in Australia only a small percentage of alpacas are Suris. The Suri has a fleece with a strongly defined staple. The Suri is covered in long, pencil fine locks, which hang straight down from the body. The fleece has

lustre and it feels more slippery and silky than that of the Huacaya. The predominant Suri colours are white and fawn.



**Huacaya**



**Suri**

### **Alpacas and the environment**

Alpacas are the most environmentally friendly of our agricultural animals - their soft padded feet do not cut into the top soil in the same way as sheep, goats, cattle and horses do with their sharp hooves.

Damage to top soil decreases long term soil fertility and in the process, the soil is eroded and weed invasion is encouraged.

Soil compaction is minimized by their soft padded feet and static load weight - alpacas are gentler on Australia's fragile soils.

The static load weight (ie weight per projected unit in contact) of alpacas at 39 kPA compares favourably with sheep at 82 kPA, cattle at 185 kPA and man 95 kPA. Even native animals such as kangaroos are slightly higher at 46 kPA.

Farming alpacas helps preserve bio-diversity. It is not necessary to sow expensive, annual pastures.

Due to their most efficient conversion rate, alpacas do well on a variety of high fibre, low protein grasses, including native species. These native grasses do not require nitrogen and phosphorous fertilizers, the major contributors to the growth of harmful blue-green algae in our waterways.

Alpacas are kinder to pasture, browsing on a variety of grasses and other plants without disrupting root systems, rather than overeating. This allows faster pasture regrowth and minimizes soil erosion.

Stocking rate is equivalent to that of sheep.

Alpaca fibre with its vast array of beautiful natural colours means there is less need for chemical (often toxic) dyes. Organically grown fibre, especially alpaca fibre, is increasing in demand world wide.

The low grease content in alpaca fibre minimizes the need for powerful cleansing chemicals. This lessens the quantity and effects of the effluent produced during the processing of the fibre.

Parasites, flystrike and lice in alpacas are extremely rare. Thus the need for pesticides is minimal.

## The Guardian Alpaca

Alpacas are, by nature, a herd animal. They are happiest with other alpacas where they quickly work out their 'pecking order' and social groups. The females are doting mothers. Both females and males are very protective of each other and especially of their young.

Nevertheless, alpacas adapt quickly to new surroundings and it is becoming common place to see alpacas in a flock of sheep where they are proving invaluable as protectors of their 'adopted herd'.



There is no doubt as to the hardy disposition of alpacas. Despite their quiet and friendly nature, they have survived the harshest of weather conditions in the Andean Mountains of South America. It was here that they developed the instincts which enable them to fend off predators, including mountain lions.

Alpacas are very alert, with excellent eyesight. A loud distress or warning call quickly sees the adults in a herd encircle the young to protect them from approaching danger. Much to the intruder's surprise, the assertive leaders then approach with great speed, stomping, kicking, spitting or biting which soon gets the message across and sees the aggressor fleeing for cover.

### Advantages of using Alpacas

Alpacas develop the same protective instincts and behaviours in a flock of sheep. Ewes and lambs are kept together with the alpacas constantly on alert, patrolling and protecting.

The problem of lamb losses to foxes can be solved by simply putting two alpacas in with the ewes a few weeks before lambing and leaving them there until weaning.

While running with the sheep, alpacas need no special attention. Fencing suitable for sheep is more than adequate for alpacas. Pasture needs are similar to sheep.

There is increasing acceptance and acknowledgment of the effectiveness of alpacas for protecting sheep flocks. Some farmers have recorded improved lambing rates from the low 80% to more than 100%. In SA's Mid North, farmers have recorded a better than 100% lambing rate "for the first time ever".

Goat breeders have also reported a decrease in the number of kids lost to predators when alpacas are run with the herd during kidding season.

And when not on guardian duty they can provide much pleasure and enjoyment as farmyard companions.

### Cost

Two mature male alpacas, suitable for the role as guardians, will usually cost about \$1,000. But considering their low maintenance costs, the fact they live for 15 to 20 years, and the dramatic increase in lambing rates, the investment can be quickly recovered.

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