

## ALPACAS FOR AFRICA

### History

Fibre of the gods! This is how the early Inca people of South America revered the alpaca eight thousand years ago. Its fibre was reserved for royalty and formed part of their currency of exchange where people were remunerated with the highly prized alpaca cloth. *“In all of human history there may have been nothing like the Incan obsession with fine cloth”*. (Hoffman, 2003).

The appalling slaughter during the Spanish Conquest in the 1500s of the Inca Empire, not only decimated the Inca people as well as millions upon millions of alpacas but, since pre Hispanic Andean cultures had no written language, the fine nuances of ancient Inca pastoralism were lost forever. Indeed, mummified remains of alpacas reveal a fibre whose fineness has not been replicated at any time since the Conquest.

That alpacas survived was due to their importance to the Inca people who rescued a few from slaughter and smuggled them into the mountainous areas. It is from this small herd that all alpacas derive today. The animals' ability to tolerate extraordinary harsh climatic conditions was also fundamental to their survival. It was not until the mid-1800s that the beauty and resilience of alpaca fleece was 'rediscovered' and re-awoke the world's interest. Today, South American alpaca farming is concentrated in the Altiplano - the high altitude regions of the Southern Peru, Bolivia and Chile.



### Husbandry

Alpacas are a domesticated member of the camel (camelid) family. The camelid family also includes llamas, guanacos, and vicunas from South America, and the Bactrian and Dromedary camels from Asia and Africa.

A fully fleeced alpaca with good coverage around the face and legs is an extremely beautiful and captivating animal and a good reason why so many farmers and lifestyle block holders have entered the industry. The two coat or breed types are the huacaya and the suri. The huacaya is characterized by a thick dense fleece growing perpendicularly from the body. Good huacaya fibre has a soft handle, brightness of sheen and frequently has a defined crimp throughout the blanket area. The rare and prized suri is distinguished by its long silky fibre that grows parallel to the body and hangs in long, separate, distinctive pencil-like locks, resembling dreadlocks but without matted fibres.



*Suri*

Fibres of both types are considered luxury fibres in the textile trade because of their unique qualities. An alpaca produces enough fleece each year to create a variety of products such as soft, warm sweaters, scarves, hats, shawls, socks, blankets, duvet filling, carpets and much more.

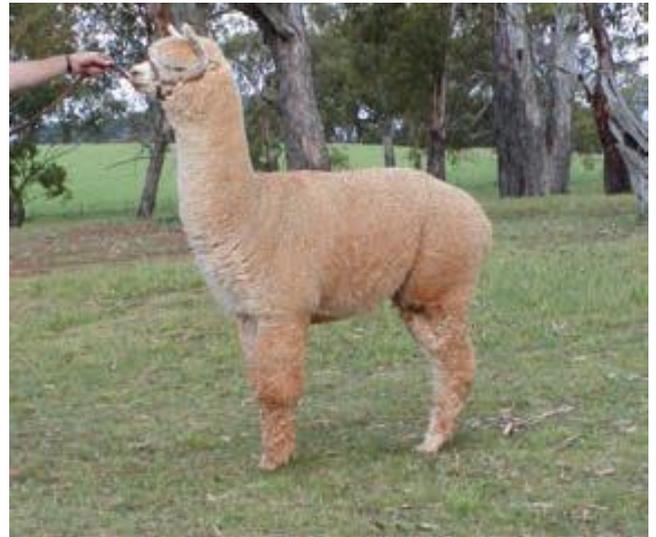
What sets alpaca apart from many other animal fibres is that, firstly, it contains much less lanolin than sheep wool, giving it its hypoallergenic characteristic.

Royal Baby Alpaca fibre comes from their first shearing. It is beautiful and soft. Consequently a garment made from this has a sensual softness to it that is blissfully luxurious.

Serious fibre breeders aim for low micron fleece in the 15-18 micron range with specific intention to remove all guard hair. Currently, much of the fibre falls into the more general but still extremely acceptable 20-24 micron category. Through selective breeding programmes for high fibre density and length, high fleece weights of low diameter wool of exceptional quality are produced.

Fibre that is >30 microns, if worn against the skin may itch or prickle. It's recommended that this fibre be used in products that do not touch the skin directly.

Another accolade of this aristocratic breed is that they are the most colour-diversified fibre-bearing animal in the world. Twenty-two colours and shades make up the rainbow of natural fleece available and, for this reason, many producers of handmade alpaca goods prefer to use these colours to blend with one another rather than corrupt an otherwise organic product with chemical and other dyes.



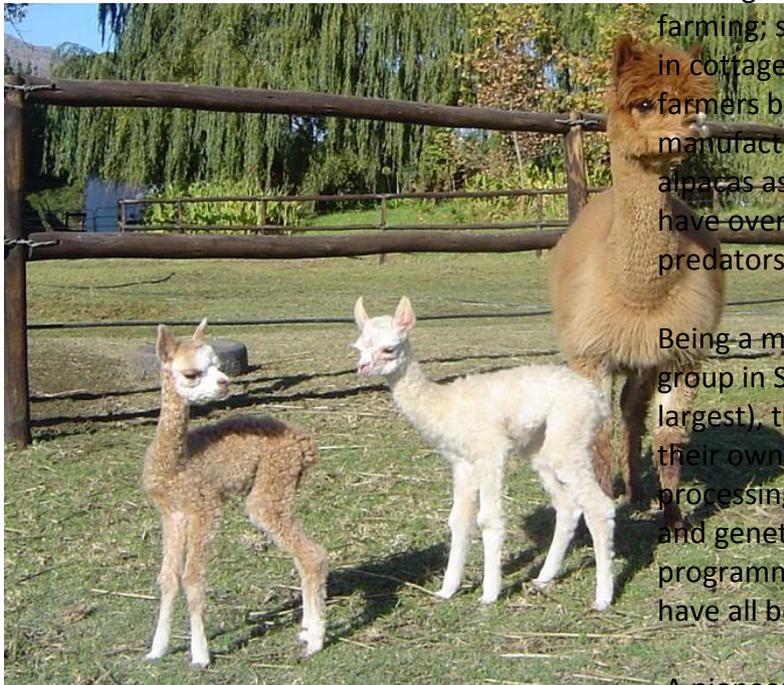
*Huacaya*

Alpacas are easy to care for - they do not require special fencing or a lot of acreage (5 to 8 animals/acre or 15/hectare). The alpaca's feet are padded and leave even the most delicate terrain undamaged. Alpacas are grazers and like sheep, horses and cattle, they chew their cud (modified ruminants). They convert grass and hay to energy very efficiently, eating less than other farm animals. They require good quality hay (primarily grasses) and are supplemented with grain and mineral mixes to meet their proper nutritional requirements. Its camelid ancestry allows the alpaca to thrive without consuming very much water, although an abundant, fresh water supply is necessary. A herd of alpacas consolidates its faeces in one or two spots in the pasture, thereby controlling the spread of parasites, and making it easy to collect and compost for fertilizer.

Intelligent, hardy, stoic and funny are words that spring to mind when describing the alpaca. Like humans, they have individual faces and expressions, some with smiley faces, others with grumpy faces and all with their very own personalities. Alpacas are very social animals and communicate to each other with humming noises, body and head movements. Apart from routine vaccinations, teeth and toe nail check-ups

and annual shearing, alpacas are fairly low maintenance animals.

Females almost always give birth in the mornings, very often in the early morning, hardly ever in the afternoon, and mostly without incidence. In their natural environment, in the higher altitudes of the Altiplano in the Andes Mountains of Chile and Peru, these *cria* (Spanish for baby) must be able to move along with the herd by nightfall. The gestation is a long one, between 11 and 12 months and twins, extremely unusual in alpaca births, rarely survive (in Villiersdorp, South Africa, there is a famous set of twins called Salt & Pepper – see photo below).



The mothers are ready (and keen) for re-mating 3 weeks after giving birth and thus are virtually continually pregnant. Male alpacas reach sexual maturity at about 2 1/2 years of age. Females are first bred from 12 months of age, or having reached a weight of 40kg.

#### Worldwide

In 1984, the United States and Canada imported their first alpacas, followed by Australia and New Zealand in 1989. These countries with their temperate climates

and more sophisticated animal husbandry techniques have proven beneficial for the improvement of the species. Alpacas have since grown in popularity internationally (approx 4 million worldwide, predominantly in Peru) for their luxury fibre and as pet, show, and investment animals. They are also bred in England, Poland, Germany, France, Israel, the Far East and in South Africa.

#### South Africa

With a climate not dissimilar to Australia, South Africa introduced its first alpacas in 2000 where the alpaca industry has since evolved into a young and fast growing one. It is an industry which suits those wishing to diversify from conventional farming; smallholders and those engaged in cottage industries; groups of alpaca farmers breeding for milling and manufacture of fine fabric and, using alpacas as herd guards, sheep farmers have overcome losses sustained by predators.

Being a minority animal fibre-producing group in South Africa (merino being the largest), the alpaca breeders have forged their own path in establishing fibre processing ventures, marketing campaigns and genetic improvement training programmes with overseas advisors which have all been privately funded.

A pioneering breeder in Mooi River imported a Belfast mill from Canada which has provided invaluable service to those wishing to process raw fibre into spun yarn. Turning his attention to new opportunities, this breeder is now manufacturing duvets and pillows filled with alpaca fibre – which will be launched in the South African market early 2013. In order to concentrate on this new venture, the Belfast mini-mill has relocated to new owners and a new home in the Western

Cape where it partners a large carding machine dedicated to alpaca fibre processing.

With around 4000 animals comprising the national herd, some South African breeders are using the alpaca's extraordinarily luxurious fibre in the manufacture of high end, handmade fashion knitwear, baby and toddler clothing and beautiful woven accessories. Jobs have been created within farming communities by training skills such as spinning, weaving and felting as well as those engaged in the milling process and, of course, the animal husbandry itself.

One of the many great things about farming with alpacas is the versatility it offers the owner. Alpacas may be kept in twos and threes as pets; breeders may wish to run just a few animals to enhance their lifestyles; others with larger numbers are looking seriously into colour and trait genetics in order to improve the fibre qualities of locally bred animals, and embryo transfer is being researched and considered.



Organic wool (*derived from sheep, goat, rabbit, **alpaca**, vicuna, yaks etc*) is becoming more and more popular as people realise the immense benefits of natural products versus man-made fibres. Wool awareness campaigns have been rolling out over the last few years around the world, uplifting the product's profile and potential. It is becoming easier to find in clothing and other products as wool is re-embraced as the 'fibre of choice'.

The alpaca is a complementary animal to the other well-established wool fibre groups in South Africa - merino, angora, mohair to name a few. South Africa, a relatively small country in comparison to others, is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> worldwide in merino wool production. South African Alpaca fibre has the potential to complement and/or boost this ranking through the acknowledgement, vision, support and courage of breeders, farmers and other wool producing organizations.

*Acknowledgements:*

*Various members of South African Alpaca Breeders Society - [www.alpacasociety.co.za](http://www.alpacasociety.co.za)  
SRS Alpacas, Australia*

Word Count: Approx 1600