

# NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ALPACA BREEDERS' SOCIETY

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## 2014 SAABS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Affiliated to the South African Stud Book and Livestock Improvement Association



**M**embers please note that our Society AGM will be held this year at Quenti Mill, Klein Limietrivier Farm near Wellington by kind permission of Linda and Stephen Nessworthy. The date for this is Saturday 9th August 2014 starting at 10.15 am and plans for a Sunday programme are currently under discussion. We are grateful indeed to Linda and Stephen for this offer and the opportunity to see their mini-mill in action as well as new industrial spinning machinery which has recently arrived and should be operational by then.

So please put this date in your diary and keep an eye on emails.

### Call for Agenda Items

**I**tems for inclusion in the agenda must be sent to Di Kruger not less than 30 days prior to the meeting. Therefore 8<sup>th</sup> July is our deadline.

Please remember that one must be a paid up member in order to attend and vote.

So please get your thinking caps on.

## COUNTING SHEEP

*Part I – from the alpaca breeder's point of view ...*

**S**heep farmers experience countless losses of lambs, as well as ewes, to predators. Most likely quite a few of us, willingly or unwillingly, have sold a few male alpacas on to guard against predators. Perhaps having too many boys, or a bit of a problem with the cash flow has necessitated the sale of wethers to sheep farmers.

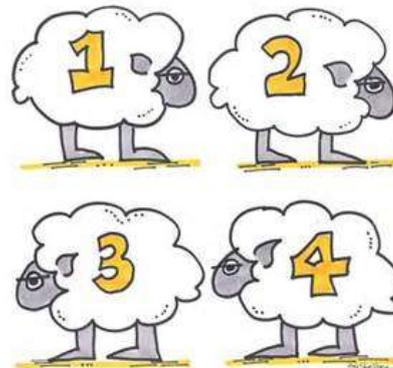
I asked Sally Kingwill from Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape some questions since over the last decade she has been active in linking alpaca breeders to sheep farmers and vice versa.

### An introduction to Sally Kingwill

I first became interested in alpacas while I was in Australia in 2000. I was farming with my father here in the Graaff-Reinet district in South Africa at that time

and one of the biggest problems even back then was losses incurred amongst the sheep due to predation.

New ideas and new approaches were needed so I looked into what the Australians were doing and



someone mentioned alpacas were used there for this purpose. I found the alpaca to be an interesting animal overall, and did some research by spending time with alpaca breeders in

Australia. I returned to SA, and purchased a few imported females. The alpaca was fairly unknown here then.

The herd guarding abilities of the alpaca were not being promoted, so the only way to get that aspect going was to buy a few males and show other farmers their usefulness in this respect. I first used alpacas to guard weaned lambs, in fairly mountainous terrain, and from the start this showed positive results. There was a general move at that time towards a more vermin friendly approach, i.e a less cruel way of dealing with vermin, using protective methods rather than blanket killing of vermin. I spent a lot of time just informing farmers about what the capabilities of an alpaca were, especially the fibre potential, since that was something they could relate to. The show pony / novelty pet image I thought did not do the alpaca justice, if one considered its history of survival in South America, its fibre qualities, and its success in Australia.

I went on to offer to manage other people's alpacas here at Crickleywood Farm, which is part of a larger farming operation, and eventually that led to having a co-operative setup between four stud alpaca breeders - my own Country Roads Stud, Khuno Alpacas, Mukuti Stud and Southern Cross Alpaca Stud, with stud males available to other alpaca breeders in the Eastern Cape. Now, with the mill so close by to process the fibre, and the alpacas now running out extensively amongst sheep and cattle on our veldt most of the time, making it far more cost-effective, the future for making the most of this interesting animal is looking good here in the Eastern Cape.



Alpacas at sunrise near Graaff Reinet

The demand by farmers for commercial alpaca stock is growing as prices come down in line with a developing industry and the guard market continues to tick over.

**Q** When we hear the name Sally Kingwill we associate your name with alpacas as herd guards. When and why did you become involved with using alpacas to control predators?

**A** The why to that question has not really been answered yet – why alpacas, and not something else? Most options available to a farmer back around 2000 involved relying on a person to kill the vermin, which had been going on for about 100 years. Yet the problem of predation

was getting worse. Labour was becoming more unreliable, and less skilled at tracking vermin. I believed a 24 /7, nature vs nature defensive /guarding approach would have better results. Alternative choices were a dog, or a donkey, or electronic devices, or protective gear put on the sheep. I thought the alpaca was a better option than these. Easier to manage, no training involved, longevity, intelligence, and a natural ability and instinct to defend its own against threats from vermin. As the predation problem has worsened recently the alpaca is only one of many 'tools' used to deal with this problem. Management practices have needed to be adapted. I also run donkeys and a guard dog and my sheep on one property can only be run intensively, being checked every day. The reason for different approaches within one farming operation, is because of differing threats.

**Q** Approximately how many alpacas have you placed as “predator controllers”, or herd guards, as they are known?

**A** I stopped counting at 150.

**Q** Is there an optimum age at which these male alpacas are introduced to flocks of sheep? Is it best to “catch ‘em young” or do you sometimes place older animals?

**A** Guarding requires a certain attitude from an alpaca. This factor is probably more important than age but as an alpaca ages it matures and with that comes the aggression and territorial instinct needed, so most alpacas can be assessed if they are going to be any good as guards, by the time they reach 18 months of age. Preferably they should have been around sheep since birth but they can be put with sheep from about 12 months of age and left to mature, giving the owner time to assess them. If they do not show the right attitude I do not sell them on as guards. Probably 80% of males are capable of protecting small stock to some degree.

**Q** Are all these alpacas wethers or do some of them remain entire?

**A** Males tend to be more aggressive, which is a good thing, so most of the alpacas I have sold as guards have been males. Neutering is an added cost, unnecessary in this case.

**Q** Are your sheep farmer clients just from your area or are you able to link alpacas to sheep farmers in other provinces?

**A** I have connected with farmers all over South Africa, even into Namibia and Botswana.

**Q** Have you had repeat enquiries from the same source?

**A** Repeat buyers are the most valuable clients – not only do more alpacas on a farm mean a greater chance of success for the farmer, but it is also the best form of marketing for alpacas.

**Q** What would you say is the average price paid for a herd guard alpaca?

**A** Prices have gone up since starting, and are now coming down again. Probably around R5000 is the average. Prices should be competitive in the guarding market, that is to say, potential buyers compare buying alpacas with buying dogs, donkeys, other protective options available and even the cost of hunting the predator is compared to buying two alpacas. A donkey for example can be purchased for just R250 and can be effective.



Strong healthy cria in the veldt

**Q** Have you seen the alpaca's popularity as a herd guard increase or decrease since you have been promoting them?

**A** At the start, they were an unknown quantity. These days, most farmers are aware of what they are. So that is a good thing for the alpaca industry. Regarding popularity I would prefer to go with what a farmer with good management practices is consistently showing with successful results, and leave the popularity issue to Idols competitors. The problem farmers have with predation, which makes them consider alpacas as part of the solution, is far too complex to answer that question simply. The problem of predation has become an issue at organized agriculture level, with many contributing factors.

Small stock farming in our country is also changing drastically, as our political landscape changes. Many farmers are now lambing ewes in pens, in stables, for example, and only

farming sheep intensively rather than extensively. Therefore the nature of sheep farming has changed to such an extent that possibly the need for protecting small stock is being affected. The Rift Valley Fever epidemic definitely had a negative impact on the perception of alpacas, as many died. But this was largely due to misinformation, and the fact that many had not been vaccinated. What is important to note is what farmers, who have had alpacas for a number of years, are saying - the farmers who have good management skills. They say they are better off with alpacas than without. The consistency with which their good guards perform is what counts. These are the results to be noted. Often, when a farmer claims an alpaca does not work, there is another reason for it. So I still believe there is a good market for alpacas as guards as long as they are good at it and priced competitively for this market. It is important that alpaca breeders look after this market by only supplying alpacas fit for this role, not just any unwanted male.

**Q** We know that alpacas have helped curb sheep and lamb deaths through predators. In your experience would you say the success rate, i.e. lamb losses, has been 25% improvement, 50% improvement, 60% or higher, and over how many years?

**A** The success rate varies; what is important is that an alpaca continuously has a positive effect for the farmer. I kept records for the first few years and the difference averaged around a 10% increase on weaning percentages from before using alpacas. As stated before, the management skills of the farmer are key to the success of any plan made to combat predation. So those farmers who said the vermin tracks were seen to show that they avoided camps where alpacas were, or those farmers who noted alpacas defending flocks against baboons, gave one an idea of the extent to which alpacas were making a difference. Another interesting point to note comes from farmers who have alpacas with years of experience now. Quite a few of them claim the alpacas have become better with age. This is most certainly what I have observed.

Lastly – how to know if you have an alpaca that can go on to be a guard. Signs to look for:

1. They must be robust and healthy, alert with a curious nature and active. Size and colour are not important;

2. They must signal the alarm should you bring unknown dogs, for example, into their area;
3. They must confront the threat or at least stand between it and female alpacas, or small stock;
4. The more ‘difficult’ they are to handle the better. The tendency to always want to spit you, fight you, or kick, is good.

*See Part II of this article next month – from the sheep farmer’s perspective.*

## **DECOREX CAPE TOWN 2014 – widely declared ‘most beautiful show ever!’**

**D**ecorex Cape Town ended on a high note and was widely described as one of the ‘most beautiful shows ever’. Over 42 900 visitors came through the CTICC doors over the Freedom Day long weekend to see the latest décor, designs, home products and ideas – all presented under one roof.

The theme of this year’s exhibition was Design Your Life, focusing on the rise of individual style, and featured many new elements including the 100% Design South Africa preview pavilion. The installation showcased 100 Beautiful Things, in celebration of World Design Capital’s theme of Beautiful Spaces, Beautiful Things. 100% Design South Africa preview showcased designs by South Africa’s well known designers– a sneak preview of the exhibition itself, which takes place later this year alongside Decorex Joburg.

*Now hear what Debbie Braunlich of Stonehill Originals had to say:-*

### **ALPACA at DECOREX CAPE TOWN**

**D**ecorex was held between 25th-28th April at the CTICC near the V&A Waterfront. This four day exhibition was a huge learning curve for me as it was my first exhibition at such a large event. As stand costs were prohibitively high and beyond my financial reach, I was given the choice of exhibiting in the Craft Collective section which turned out to be a good decision.

This year’s Craft Collective was quite extensive and showcased many entrepreneurs with their locally made produce. Time and time again visitors commented that the Craft Collective section was the most interesting as the vast majority of the products in the

rest of the hall were mass-produced items (kettles, toasters, etc).



Debbie Braunlich’s stand at Decorex

Buyers were seeking individual, unique, handmade items for their homes. Sales in the Craft Collective section

were high especially on the Sunday and Monday.

Another benefit of being part of the Craft Collective was that visitors had to pass by all of our stands in order to get to 100% Design which was being launched in Cape Town. 100% Design is officially being brought to South Africa for the first time this year at Decorex Johannesburg in August – it is one of the largest, most prestigious design exhibitions in the world. The Johannesburg exhibition will showcase top South African designers whose products meet world class standards. The Craft Collective stands, being placed alongside 100% Design, were automatically elevated a notch through the association.

