

ALPACAS FOR ME – fact v fiction

By Ian Watt*

Alpacas are not for everyone – fact.

Welcome to the wonderful world of alpacas – a world that will give you hours, days and years of absolute pleasure and joy... and moments of frustration, sadness and worry.

While there is much to enjoy and appreciate about these wonderful animals, they are an animal that can totally consume you and your life or they can give you measured happiness and satisfaction that only animals seem to be able to give human beings.

Once we accept ownership of any animal we accept custodianship of a life and the responsibility that comes with that custodianship – a responsibility that most of us accept with alacrity and purpose. However, we can only do that when we have sufficient knowledge and understanding to make a considered decision.

Hopefully this paper will give some reassurance where needed, identify potential pitfalls in alpaca ownership whilst also filling in some gaps that may appear through conflicting information.

Firstly, let it be quite clear that this discussion comes from the perspective that alpacas are animals and not extensions of human families and/or values.

Secondly, the information comes from a personal perspective based on years of both ownership as well as industry development and private consultancy in commercial aspects of fibre and animal production.

And, lastly, it is one persons' opinion!

Huacaya and Suri are two different breeds.

Fiction – they are both alpacas with differing fleece qualities. For as many times that temperament, bone density, head profile, etc are promoted as breed differences, as many examples of compatability in those same traits that can be found. Crossing these fleece types wil always produce either an huacaya or a suri fleece type and the animal will always be an alpaca.

Alpacas are environmentally friendly.

True – and this is a BIG feature of owning these animals! The grazing nature of alpacas together with their padded feet, poo pile practices, ability to do well under harsh environments and lack of need of high quality pastures are all features that should endear these animals to conservationists and environmentalists alike. Most domesticated farm animals damage the environment in one way or another – these animals do not unless they are

unsympathetically managed to disadvantage. Browsers by nature, they rarely decimate areas of paddocks, their padded feet do not tear at the soil structure creating potential erosion problems, their poo piles limit pollution of the pasture on a large scale and limit the spread of internal parasites, and their ability to process poor quality grasses limit the need for provision of improved pastures through the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and weedicides.

Alpacas need specialist fencing.

True - and false. Fencing is usually associated with keeping animals within specified boundaries for either legal, social or management purposes. In America there is an added complication in keeping alpacas and that is to deter predators from entering the property and creating untold havoc and pain. Bears, cats, deer, coyotes and cats are examples of environments where standard four foot fencing would be inadequate and where higher, closer spaced wire and reinforced posts will be necessary. For those areas that do not have these predator risks, standard seven wire fencing with a barb along the ground and the top wire four feet above the ground level will suffice.

Alpacas produce a cria once a year.

False – and probably one of the most quoted and inaccurate myths about these animals. Alpacas have a pregnancy gestation of 11.5 months on average with periods ranging from 11 to 12 months not uncommon. Depending on personal preference and environmental considerations (snow, cold, heat, humidity for example), birthed females may be mated as early as 10 to 12 days after delivery or as long as three months. On average, a hundred females will produce and wean about 70 cria a year up to 80 with good management practices.

Females should not be mated under 18 months to two years.

False – ideally a female alpaca should weigh a hundred pounds and be well grown and fertile before mating. Under-developed and underweight animals should never be mated regardless of age. There are some breeders who believe that other considerations such as social maturity should be considered.

Alpacas need shelter.

True - most animals benefit from shelter and alpacas are no exception. Shelter from wind and rain is essential for younger animals especially newborn. Shade from the sun is essential for pregnant dams as excessive heat can form deformities in the unborn and place enormous stress on the cooling system of the dam.

Alpacas are camels and do not need much water.

False – while alpacas are members of the same family as camels, they need as much water as any other specie of farm animal. Clean, fresh and plentiful water is essential for healthy alpacas.

Alpacas need teeth and feet trimming.

True – especially where they are run under ‘improved’ growing conditions (‘improved’ is where pastures have been upgraded, soils are damp and stone free and animals have an easy time of it). Foot trimming once or twice a year is normal practice whilst teeth may need to be trimmed annually depending on the type of feed being fed. Both operations can be done on farm by the owner and are not difficult.

Cria are high maintenance.

False – by far the large majority of cria need minimal maintenance and care. These are very hardy animals that usually need minimum human intervention to survive and do well. It is humans who ‘see’ a need for intervention that create (no pun intended!) situations and fears that require help. A careful eye at birthing, treatment of the umbilical cord with an iodine compound and checking to ensure that the airway is clear is all that is usually needed at birth. Close scrutiny to ensure that the cria is getting essential colostrum in the first 24 to 48 hours and adequate milk supply in the following weeks should be normal management practice. Of course, there will be occasions when intervention for more serious reasons will be essential but these are not frequent.

Alpacas spit and kick.

True – these are natural defence reflexes that are not usually aimed at humans but are often hurtful or embarrassing when they are!

Alpaca fibre is seven times warmer than wool.

False – alpaca fibre is thought to be as much as three times warmer than the same weight of wool which makes it a highly sought after knitting alternative to wool. There is much made about the supposed hollowness of alpaca fibre but the reality is that there is not much hollow fibre but there are other features which make alpaca such a desirable alternative.

Natural coloured alpaca fibre does not fade.

True – as with all naturally occurring colours in fibre, they will not fade thus giving alpaca a unique place in natural fibres.

Breeding like colour to like colour will give like colour.

False – while breeding to this recipe enhances the chances of a predictable colour outcome, the fact is that breeding for colour is still something of a crapshoot. Breeding like to like will, in most cases, enhance the chances of a specific colour outcome but not guarantee it.

Commercially, the fibre processors want white colour.

True – the international demand is for white fibre. Colour enjoys a unique niche market but in a commercial sense it will be many, many years before there are sufficient quantities of any one colour to justify commercial processing runs.

Spinners and weavers are looking for colour fibre.

True – this market is huge and must be unsatisfied at this time. However, it is a niche market that requires much more individual effort to discover and encourage.

Alpacas in America are a sustainable industry.

True – there are many advantages America has to sustain a large alpaca industry including population, land, wealth and lifestyle. Enthusiasm for all things alpaca remains unabated with record numbers joining the industry marketing body, AOBA, record auction sale clearances – and prices sometimes – strong farm gate sales and keen consumer interest in fibre products. As the national herd grows there will be a separating of prices based on quality with lesser quality animals becoming more and more affordable. The future looks really bright and more-or-less assured with the usual caveat that buyers should do their research really well before entering what is still essentially a risk industry.

Never before has so much information about alpacas been available to new entrants (or existing stakeholders for that matter) and not for a long time have so many Americans been open to lifestyle changes that these animals can bring. As with all things, investing money in lifestyle brings about its own set of issues that need to be researched, considered and acted upon.

Alpacas are no exception.

When considering these wonderful animals, look beyond the hype and glossy marketing material, ask the questions and research the responses. Only then can you make the investment confident in the outcomes as you enjoy these animals and your involvement in the supportive and caring world of alpaca owners and breeders.

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