



Central Region Newsletter

October 2021

Your Monthly Central Region Newsletter From The Alpaca Association New Zealand



Clubhouse Chrissie and her cria Buster - Rachel Norman

Six months have passed since your current committee was formed at the AANZ Central Region AGM.

This newsletter marks an important milestone for both the region and the association. In our first newsletter we shared our commitment to bring you relevant and timely information about all things relating to alpaca. We have enjoyed meeting that commitment each month and participating in farm days and cluster groups.

The world around us has been rapidly changing and the amazing team spirit of kiwis and the determination to hold back the disruptions of lockdowns has enabled us to continue doing things many alpaca owners around the world have been unable to do. Shows, cluster groups and trading in alpaca and alpaca products were largely unaffected, at least in those early months.

Shows continue to see a few disruptions as we navigate our way through levels and we're hopeful that a new sense of normality will be returning soon. Until then, we thank every one of you and the wider readership for your steadfast resolve in taking great care of your alpacas and remaining part of this vibrant community.

Your committee remains committed to bringing you new activities and sharing new ideas and topics of interest. And if we don't you know to hold us to account. We're here for you and looking forward to the next six months.

In this edition of your newsletter we're taking a deep dive into the state of the national herd to consider the history, our current position and the trajectory we are on. We will also look at how to buy alpaca with confidence.

And we're continuing to place our alpaca front and centre of our minds with important health and welfare topics that sorely need wider awareness in the smaller herds.

Thank you for your continued readership. If you're not already, please consider becoming a member of the association and helping to support your central region committee.

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The Economics of Alpaca

By John Malsher

Darwin is often credited with quoting “It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.”

Alpaca have been challenged by the need to adapt to New Zealand’s conditions with mineral, vitamin and nutrient deficiencies in our soil and reduced sunlight. Our abundance of grass, while satisfying to the needs of many animals, is in direct contrast to the pasture of their natural habitat and their foraging nature.

Over a few short decades alpaca in New Zealand have seen a profound increase in their need for supplements.

Without the appropriate vitamins, food, drenching and vaccinations, alpaca are susceptible to many illnesses. The alpaca of today are lacking the hardiness that those earlier alpaca pioneers carried over from their homeland.

The rich grass, low altitude and the lack of some trace minerals have made for a less robust alpaca.

Most alpaca in New Zealand enjoy a long and happy life. Some return a profit for their owners through breeding, and other avenues, but almost all will see a life that extends beyond the point where there is any residual value in their fleece or for breeding, thus creating an aging national herd where many become pets.

There is also an increasing number of long term breeders exiting the industry, often breaking up a large high quality herd into smaller groups spread across many owners – some with knowledge of how to keep increasing these qualities and others get “lost” to being pets.

Most alarming to many of us are the number that are now being neglected or given away as “paddock munchers”, “long necked sheep” or “paddock ornaments”. These situations have a direct impact on the average price for alpaca and the quality of the national herds fleece.

Alpaca are considered a hobby breed and they can live for many years. Would it not be great to see alpacas as a major economic cornerstone of our agricultural industry like sheep, cattle and deer?

Even the most discerning alpaca owner who has researched the breed will struggle to justify the price variance between a high cost alpaca and one of almost comparable quality for free. Certainly for the pet market the expense isn’t justified and if purchased for breeding as a commercial venture, low cost can be more attractive than the genetic difference would suggest.

This is commoditisation at work and is driven by the progressive devaluation of items in the eyes of the market. Survival in a market where prices are in freefall depends on differentiation. The pricing power of the breeder has been weakened and the buyer is now empowered and will tend to buy the cheapest.

The alpaca industry must adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself if it is to survive. We all have a role to play if we are to recover. Please breed responsibly and help rebuild an industry focused on quality, not quantity. The “Fibre of the Gods” seems to be losing its value on many fronts.

Paul Eising

We were shocked and saddened to hear of the sudden and unexpected passing of Paul on 28 September 2021. Paul was known by many of us as he worked around much of the lower North Island shearing our alpacas.

He has helped many of us on our journeys with alpacas, often taking the time to show owners how to cut toenails and do injections – or doing these things for you.

Your shearing day would be filled with laughter and stories with his quick wit and unmistakable laugh, making each years shearing a day to look forward to.

Paul was also on hand to help the local SPCA Inspectors with shearing and transport of many an alpaca and sheep. A true “good bloke” Paul has left a huge hole in the alpaca community.

Our deepest condolences are with his family through these difficult times. A private service and interment were held on 5th October. Aroha nui.



Photo credit Sue McAuley

Buying Alpaca with Confidence

This guide is intended to help both new and reasonably experienced owners make smart and responsible choices in the way they buy alpaca. It is a buyers market - take the time to understand what you're buying and leverage the advantage you have to create a high quality herd within your budget.

To buy or not to buy (pun intended)

Can you find the alpaca you're looking for at zero cost? There are so many alpaca in desperate need of a new home, that fueling the expansion of the national herd is ignoring the suffering of unwanted animals and their likely future.

Just because an alpaca is available for free does not mean that it is of any less quality. You'll want to do your research, but there are bargains to be found if you take the time to check them out. You don't always have to breed and add more animals to an already large national herd.

If you choose to buy from a breeder, be sure to pick a breeder that is Alpaca Association New Zealand registered. A breeder who is registered with the AANZ is a reasonable indicator that the breeder is concerned for the health and wellbeing of the alpaca and wants to ensure any buyer has a long and happy relationship with their alpaca.

Some breeders will fund a lifestyle or full membership to the AANZ for the first year if you're not already a member.

Ask to talk to other owners who have purchased from the breeder. A willingness to put you in contact with others is a promising sign. Don't be afraid to ask one breeder about another breeder. We're a friendly bunch and although there is competition, most breeders happily collaborate with other breeders to help you find the alpaca you're looking for. If the colour, sex, age or other trait your after isn't available, one breeder might put you in touch with another.

Breeders who are less engaging with other breeders might not be so easy to assess in isolation, so look for those breeders that participate in cluster groups, farm days, public events or attend alpaca shows.

The registered alpaca

The Alpaca Association New Zealand provides a registry for its members that records lineage which is a strong indicator of genetic authenticity.

Some breeders invest in DNA verification which is the only guaranteed relationship between alpaca. If you're buying for genetic quality, insist on DNA verification and look for evidence in the registry.

There are other registries both NZ and international which record medications, observations, fleece statistics and breeding analytics. Many alpaca appear on more than one registry so ask your breeder for evidence to back up their promotional material.

Paddock additions

Most alpaca play nicely with other alpaca, but this is not guaranteed. The social hierarchy is a complex and forever changing lore between alpaca that evolves naturally with the herd.

As an alpaca is removed or added to a herd the social dynamic changes. Sometimes this dynamic also changes due to an animals health or age. Spend time with each of the breeders herds you choose to buy from and observe the alpaca interacting with others. A little assertiveness is natural and to be expected, but aggressive fighting should be a reminder that another alpaca could be a better choice.

Agree with your breeder on a return to sender warranty. If your newly purchased alpaca is antisocial with the rest of your herd, you'll need to separate them. Any bonding issues should be resolved within a month, so be sure to have a written agreement that the breeder will collect the alpaca at their cost for a full refund if you are not satisfied.

This is a standard policy for many less important purchases in life, so exercise your buying power to protect yourself and your herd. A bad purchase can disrupt the whole dynamic of the herd and has the potential to put you in harms way if the behaviour isn't managed correctly.

If you have this agreement in place before purchase, both buyer and seller understand their obligations ahead of time to avoid any disappointment. If the breeder rejects the policy, you might have saved yourself a headache by walking away.

Age at castration

If you're buying pet boys, you'll likely want them to be desexed, in fact we recommend it. These males are known as wethers. The timing of the castration is very important, natural habits are hard to change once they are observed. If a breeder doesn't wether until the alpaca is older, you'll likely have a male that has learned certain male behaviours.

Wethered males are often sold as perfect pets and can be a pleasure to handle, but don't expect every wether to behave this way.

If a male alpaca has promising characteristics at birth, a breeder may delay the castration until those characteristics are fully matured. Ask to see veterinary invoices as proof of castration date and calculate the age of the alpaca at the time.

Cria at Foot

Cria are adorable and who doesn't want to enjoy those early years? It was once a common occurrence for alpaca to be sold pregnant, thereby providing both a mother and the potential of a cria to the buyer.

There is little incentive to purchase a pregnant female today. Cria at foot is both the mother and her living cria sold together, before weaning. Having a cria at foot will let you know that it is a healthy cria, that mum is caring for it by providing the milk it needs, and guaranteed knowledge of its gender and colour. You'll also get to check for birth abnormalities such as shape of spine.

Handling

Not all alpaca enjoying being handled, yet handling them correctly is paramount for their health. Either you or your vet will need to interact with your alpaca regularly for injections, nail trimming, body scoring and shearing.

Many alpaca are sold as halter trained, but there is a big difference between an alpaca that will tolerate a halter and one that is comfortable being led by it.

Before committing to a purchase, experience catching the alpaca you are interested in, putting on the halter, leading it and removing the halter again. If the alpaca is hard to handle in a familiar environment, it won't be any calmer when you get it home.

If you arrive at a breeder to find the halter on, ask to remove it and fit it to the alpaca yourself. Try this several times to be sure the alpaca is truly comfortable wearing and being led by a halter. If not, routine maintenance becomes a chore and chores can get missed.

It is the breeders responsibility to halter train the alpaca. Don't be persuaded that you can complete the training once you get the alpaca home.

Health records

Ask to see all the health records. Alpaca breeders have many ways of recording the interventions and medications they provide to their alpaca. Look through the records and check for any gaps or anomalies.

For example if a dam has given birth multiple times but there is a gap, ask if this was an unsuccessful year, if the cria survived, or if the alpaca was resting.

Unexplained deaths of cria and unusual medications can reveal underlying health issues which could be expensive and distressing.

An empty health record may tell you as much as one full of medications. No news is rarely good news. And good record management is a sign of a good breeder.

If your focusing on fleece, ask to see laboratory results for previous years and the same for the dam and sire. These are a low cost test and a breeder who breeds for fleece quality will be willing to share these with you.

Be sure to look for how much the figures change over time and the curve of change. This will help you predict if the fleece will continue to be great or if it's best years are behind it.

Transport

Ask your breeder to provide delivery of your newly purchased alpaca. They may not have their own transport, but they'll know someone who can provide this service on their behalf.

Transporting any live animal has significant responsibilities for the welfare of the animal. The right equipment is essential to ensure the alpaca arrives safely and with minimal stress.

There are Codes of Animal Welfare around safe transportation and these should be adhered to at all times.

After a journey you can expect the alpaca to be disorientated. Your grass will taste different and there will be new smells and sounds. Don't allow these differences to hide underlying issues that are best discussed while the breeder is still on your property and can help you understand what you're seeing.

Keep your new alpaca isolated for a few days to be sure there are no health issues that become apparent. Make sure the new alpaca is able to see two or more other alpaca that they will eventually share a paddock with. Use this time to check for any abnormalities in the way the alpaca behaves. Is it walking ok, are there signs of discomfort and are you happy with their overall condition? Contact the breeder immediately if you notice anything.

Have an "out" plan that is flexible and realistic

Few of us can plan more than two years ahead with reasonable certainty. Life has its way of being disruptive without warning and the need to relocate alpaca at short notice is an unwelcome reality many of us will face. So have a plan for what you'll do when the time comes.

Having excellent quality animals is no guarantee they'll find a new home. Be ready to accept that there's a very real chance you'll be underwhelmed by the price you can sell them for, if indeed sell at all. You may even be faced with calling in the homekill team, and it is something one needs to be aware of as a choice and a better one than abandoning them to their fate with a new property owner.

If you're looking to buy alpaca, you're in this for the long haul. Come rain or shine, putting the needs of the alpaca before your own should be the foundation of your plan and your plan should acknowledge some uncomfortable choices.

Alpacas are wonderfully fascinating creatures who offer us so much in return for some basic knowledge and care.

So take that time to consider each addition and how that will influence your herd and therefore the national herd. Let us all shape the industry that ensures alpaca ownership is enjoyable, sustainable and focused on the best outcomes for the alpaca.



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Keeping Alpacas - The Basics, Part 1.

By Stephen Kellam

All alpaca owners want the best for their animals. If you are a new owner, getting basic information for NZ conditions can be difficult. Minimum standards for keeping alpacas are defined in the MPI Code of Welfare for Llamas and Alpacas but although there is lots of good information in this document, it does not have many of the practical answers that owners want to know.

I'm quite sure that all experienced breeders are happy to spread their knowledge. In this short series of articles, I hope to provide some of the answers to questions I have been asked.

Further information on the areas covered here and other alpaca subjects can be found on my 'Alpacapedia' pages. These pages start on: <http://www.tekorito-alpacas.co.nz/101.html>

Fencing and Paddocks.

In New Zealand, fencing for alpacas is more about keeping dogs out and alpaca groupings apart rather than keeping alpacas in. Alpacas rarely challenge fences but intact males sometimes rear up onto them when close to females and crias may try to go through a fence when they are first weaned from their mothers.

Most New Zealand fencing types are suitable for alpacas, from standard eight wire sheep fencing to post and paling, are all very acceptable as long as they meet the minimum recommended height of 1.2 metres. Barbed wire must be removed as it causes injuries and can get caught up in the fleece. It can be replaced by plain HT wire if present.

Thick fleeces are a good insulation layer and make electric fencing quite ineffective. Moreover, the electric wires and tapes used for horse confinement can be dangerous to alpacas and especially to crias as they are very curious and can become entangled. Tape becoming tightly wrapped around the neck can easily kill any alpaca.

For pasture, ryegrass is by far the commonest grass grown on New Zealand farms. It is suitable for many herbivore species but since alpacas are browsers and not grazers, they prefer variety in their diet. A number of seed suppliers sell seed mixtures which include bromes, fescues, lucerne, cocksfoot, clover, plantain and others and these are better suited to alpacas. These mixtures have to be resown every few years as ryegrass will reappear in the paddocks and eventually take over. Many owners have access to willow, poplar and tagasaste (tree lucerne) trees and branches of these can be cut for fodder. All alpacas enjoy the leaves and some may carefully chew off the bark.

Essentially, alpacas will happily browse many plants but care must be taken to prevent access to poisonous species. This applies not only to what is growing in the paddock but also to overhanging trees and what they can reach one metre outside the fence line. A surprising number of plants found growing in New Zealand paddocks and gardens are poisonous to most livestock and must be removed. There is a saying of "if in doubt, pull it out" for good reason. Crias are most at risk as they will try eating plants that the adults will avoid.

The list of toxic plants is long but the most likely encountered are Oleander, Foxglove, Hemlock, Woody Nightshade, Laburnum, Iris, Jerusalem cherry, Rhododendron and Azalea, Ragwort and Box hedging. Of these, Hemlock and Rhododendron/Azalea are especially dangerous as they are relatively common and consumption of even small quantities of any parts of the plant can be fatal. Should you believe that an animal has eaten any of these, veterinary help must be obtained immediately.

Consistent and effective removal of dung from paddocks is essential for controlling parasitic worm numbers. Male alpacas are far better at using defined pooping spots (middens). The girls tend to spread it out making collection more difficult. At its simplest, this can be done using a wide pan and rake but even with the best efforts, this method will leave a quantity behind, especially in longer grass and weeds.

The most effective method is inevitably the most expensive but essential for owners of larger herds. The Paddock Vac uses vacuum created by a small petrol engine to suck the dung up through a wide pipe and into the collection chamber. These machines are easily towed behind a lawn tractor or quad bike and are very effective even in long grass or in the wet. As the alpaca digestive system kills most seeds, the collected poo is a superb easily distributed fertiliser in its own right but can also be added to compost piles.

Cross grazing of the paddocks with horses is effective in controlling worm numbers as they will graze over the middens and are not susceptible to the worms carried by alpaca and vice versa. Unfortunately, some alpaca dung will inevitably be missed and the worm eggs are remarkably resistant to being dried out during the summer. There are currently no realistic means of killing worm eggs in the paddocks.

Nutrition

Alpacas evolved to eat the native grasses found at high altitude in the Andes which for most of the year are of low nutritional value. Selection pressure has effected adaptations to their digestive systems, critical for survival in their native environment - they can extract the maximum nutrition from these grasses. On lush New Zealand paddocks there is a serious risk of animals putting on too much weight.

Alpacas require between 1.8 and 2.0% (dry weight) of their body mass per day of feed making them more efficient consumers than sheep. Supplementary feeding is not usually required except Zinc kibble during the facial eczema season or normal kibble for putting weight back onto thin animals. Alpacas are very keen on kibble (pellets) but care should be taken as they have a high calorific value and feeding to animals not needing them can lead to excess weight gain. Should you need to feed kibble, they must be fed mixed in with Lucerne mix or meadow chaff due to the risk of 'choke' - large numbers of pellets eaten quickly forming a blockage in the oesophagus. Other than as above, they can be fed in small quantities or used as training rewards.

Shelter and Shelters

Alpacas are now found all over the world and in many different climatic conditions. In spite of being cold-adapted animals they are able to thrive in a wide range of temperatures. However, higher temperatures can cause them to become heat stressed so shelter from the direct sun is very important. Shade trees are a common option and animals can often be seen sitting under them during the hottest hours of the day. Some owners provide a shallow pond or other water they can sit in but this does not improve the fleece. Some alpacas that particularly enjoy water have even been known to climb into cattle troughs.

Whilst alpacas will usually sit in the paddock during showers and light rain, no animal enjoys the impact of heavy raindrops or hail and will try to find shelter. Again, trees are a common solution (only really effective when they are in leaf) but many owners provide constructed shelters or run-in buildings for their alpacas. There are endless possible designs for these (just search Google images!) though herd size, ground and economic factors will mean that some are more suitable than others for owners.

At their simplest, 'bus stop shelter' types with the back to the prevailing wind are cheap to construct and will give adequate cover. The more elaborate types resemble barns and also may incorporate stalls, a feeding area and hay storage (above or in a partition). For the latter type, an electricity supply is invaluable, especially during the winter months. Apart from being able to light up the barn, power outlets provide for shearing and water pumps, amongst other things.

Some owners do not have designated shelters, saying that their herd only use them as a toilet or rolling area. However, if the herd is shown from day one that food is provided or found at the shelter, this is less common. Either way, the alpacas have an option during poor weather.

Water.

Water must always be freely available to your alpacas and obviously, it must be from a clean source. Given that alpacas do not drink large volumes of water, concrete cattle or horse troughs are unsuitable as they will become dirty and stagnant, especially during the summer. Many owners know that alpacas will climb into shallow troughs on the ground or splashed about using their feet during hot weather or even, seemingly, just for amusement. A solution for this are the smaller fence mounted types that hook over a paling. These can be easily plumbed with a standard garden hose connection to a tap so are self-refilling and fresh water is always added.

Whichever type of container is used, it must be cleaned regularly otherwise dirt will accumulate and during summer months, slime and algae will grow on internal surfaces and eventually turn the water green. Some of these algae can be harmful.



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