



## Suri alpaca

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*This Agriculture Note provides information on care and handling of Suri alpacas.*

### Product

Alpacas are South American members of the camelid family. Today the industry is mainly concentrated in southern Peru and Bolivia. The four species of camelids present in Peru today are the vicuna, guanaco, llama and alpaca. Of these, the llama and alpaca are domesticated and the vicuna and guanaco are wild. There are two types of alpaca, the Suri and the Huacaya. Peru produces an average of about 3.5 million kilograms of fibre annually, which represents 90% of the total world production. Only about 6% of this fibre is Suri (Safley, 1998), and it is estimated that there are less than 60,000 Suri worldwide (Walker, 1996). Constant hybridisation of the population has continued to reduce the available gene pool. The origin of the Suri is obscure, but it has existed as a distinct "type" since the time of the Incas. Inca rulers treasured Suri fibre and it was an offence for anyone other than royalty to wear it. Suris were probably raised in the lower more temperate regions before the coming of the Spanish to South America. The Spanish pushed alpaca out of the lower, better pasture areas to allow grazing of European livestock. Since this time, Huacaya and Suri have run together where they have interbred for centuries. Suri were unsuited to the higher altitudes and survived only in the herds of a few Campesinos and Quechuan Indians in remote areas of the altiplano at elevations above 14,000 feet.

Huacaya alpaca fibre comes in 22 different colours and the average fibre diameter ranges from 20 to more than 40 microns. Suri is predominantly white with a few fawn animals, although some breeders are attempting to produce different colours. Huacaya and Suri fleece types are completely different. Huacaya fleece appears full and grows perpendicular to the body. While unique, Huacaya can loosely be compared to fine crossbred wool. Suri on the other hand is more akin to mohair. It is lustrous, soft, slippery and pliable. Suri is used to weave fabric for coats and blazers. It is brushed to bring out its lustre, which gives a distinctive look to mens and womens overcoats, its primary use.

### Physical Requirements

Alpacas require few specialist facilities. Sheep fencing is adequate, and a laneway system should be incorporated for ease of handling and to avoid boxing mobs. Alpaca can be run at similar stocking rates to sheep. While numbers are low, yards can be simple, single yards, with a few pens incorporated for single matings, or separating animals. As numbers increase, yard designs will evolve, such as modified cattle yards incorporating central drafting.

Alpacas do not require crutching, and shearing is carried out by restraining animals between two posts. Custom built shearing sheds should be designed to allow ease of handling of animals and fibre, and to minimise the possibility of fibre contamination.

### Production

Alpacas are adaptable and are thriving in a wide variety of climates across Australia. They do not suffer from flystrike or footrot, and are not vulnerable to worm and fluke infestations as they drop their dung in piles in one area of the paddock. They can live for up to twenty years, but fibre quality will deteriorate after eight years or so. They should be shorn every 12 months, although in the past many animals have had overgrown fleece for show and display purposes.

Gestation is eleven months, but females can be returned to a male within a few weeks after the cria is born. Fertility and birthing complications occur, and are a major issue only because of the high value of many animals.

Published literature on Suri is extremely limited. South American information tends to favour the opinion that the Huacaya is more robust than the Suri. Escobar (1984) attributes the Suri with a poor constitution and weaker appearance, although he states that other features such as the shape of head, form and length of neck, and other characteristics are similar. The anecdotal evidence from Australia contradicts this view. Australian breeders have found Suri to be tough, and they have a slightly higher average body weight than Huacaya. The notorious susceptibility of Suri to harshness of weather is not the same problem in Australia's relatively mild climate. Lower fertility rates quoted from Peru could be nutrition related. For Australian purposes fleece type is the major

distinguishing different characteristic between Huacayas and Suri.

## Marketing

Because the industry is still largely breeder based, individual stud promotion and participation in industry events and shows are important. The Australian Alpaca Association is involved with promotion of the industry and organises shows, field days, conferences and a reference point for new entrants to the industry. Fibre is still of secondary importance to live animal sales but some attempts are being made to set up a national pool, some private buyers are operating and some breeders have had fibre processed themselves or developed markets with hand spinners.

The Australia Alpaca Cooperative is based in Victoria. The cooperative provides collection, classing, processing and marketing of a range of Alpaca products. As with most emerging industries, the marketing efforts of individuals play an important role in enterprise success.

The major marketing advantage of the Suri is its rarity. Accurate census information of world populations is not available, but if the oft quoted figure of 60,000 head is to be believed they are very rare. An American promotional brochure *Suri Alpacas* (The Suri Network) states that Suri are less than 1% of the world alpaca population. The Alpaca Book (Hoffman & Fowler, 1995) states that Suri fibre accounts for 7-10% of annual processing in Arequipa, where 90% of the world's alpaca fibre is produced. Either this figure is too high, or population estimates are far too low. Whichever is right, there are far fewer Suri than Huacaya, and demand for animals is high.

## Financial aspects

Returns will vary enormously from breeder to breeder. There is currently no orderly cash market for fibre. Live sale reports continue to reflect interest, but buyers are becoming more discerning and conscious of quality. Selected animals will continue to attract huge sums while prices for run of the mill will ease considerably. Investors own many animals and agistment is an important component of cash flow on some farms. As producers attempt to improve their fibre quality by reducing diameter and increasing fleece weight, service fees for selected superior males will provide a lucrative income stream for individual owners. Demand for wethers is constant but prices are much lower than for females or stud quality males.

## Organisations and contacts

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