

# **Alpaca Advisory Group Forum 23 March 2004**

## **Alpaca Wethers as Guardians Considerations for Buyers and Sellers**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this paper today on '**Alpacas as Guardians - Considerations for Buyers and Sellers**'. While most of the presentation and examples relate to alpacas as guardians to sheep I acknowledge that alpacas can be just as successful protecting other species.

Alpacas are herd animals and in their own environment are fiercely protective of their own. Within the herd there is normally a well-defined pecking order with protective roles assumed by the more assertive herd members. Dams are usually very attentive as mothers, while other females commonly accept the role of baby-sitting 'aunties'. Wethers run within a herd are instinctively protective. When hand-mating in smaller areas, sires are usually amazingly gentle with any cria present. Most breeders would have a tale or two about the clearly defined roles adopted by different members of a herd.

Alpacas have incredible eyesight and react immediately to something unusual or when danger is sensed. The distress call is a signal which normally sees the alpacas quickly move and group together with cria and young in the middle. The bolder herd members then move towards the threat and, if it does not retreat, will assume an aggressive role - spitting, squealing, kicking and stomping until the threat retreats - or in some cases until it has been killed.

There is no doubt that given the right alpacas and the right conditions alpacas make excellent guardians to an adopted herd of sheep, goats, other livestock, even chickens and geese - and that they are particularly effective in deterring foxes. There are plenty of written accounts of the strong bonds established between alpacas and their adopted flocks and of the many occasions alpacas have been seen chasing foxes, monitoring fence lines, standing guard over new born lambs, encouraging ewes with their new born to rejoin the herd, keeping the mobs tighter, and sitting as minders with young lambs.

Published articles like the Australian Alpaca Association's paper on '*Alpacas as Herd Protectors*', articles from Allan Jinks and Bill Robbins in AAA Magazines and National Alpaca Reviews, our own SA Region/PIRSA Alpacafact Sheet '*The Guardian Alpaca*' and many others articles by individual alpaca breeders and owners have assisted in providing authenticity to the claims of alpacas as guardians - a notion initially seen by many as a somewhat 'tall story'. How many times have we heard, "Do they really keep foxes away"?

There are plenty of success stories and instances of vastly improved lambing rates - like the one from Moculta where the farmer's lambing rate increased so dramatically that when marking his lambs he ran out of ear tags; or the one where, over two seasons, lambing rates went from 83% to 123%. Success stories like these and general positive press have largely replaced early scepticism and reservations. Many farmers who initially purchased their first pair of alpacas "to see how they go" are now convinced of their effectiveness and are returning for their second and third pairs. Neighbouring farmers, unable to ignore such statistics are also seeking alpacas.

Testimony to the success of alpacas as guardians is evidenced by the current shortage of suitable alpacas and the significant increase in prices. Word has certainly spread and with it great opportunities for the industry at large. Suitable guardian alpacas not only serve the immediate purpose of deterring foxes - they present one of the best opportunities to educate people about alpacas and generate interest in the animals and the industry. Suitable guardian alpacas shape up as a hardy, easy to care for livestock option. Suitable alpacas provide opportunities for first hand management experience. What better way to advertise and show case alpacas than to expose them to more people? Already there are farmers breeding their own guardians and already there are farmers purchasing female alpacas for guardian work as an alternative to wethered alpacas. The value of suitable guardian alpacas should not be taken lightly or underestimated - it is an area of increasing demand and one branch of the industry which offers good opportunities and success.

## So what makes a good alpaca guardian?

Ideally guardian alpacas should be fully grown and should therefore be between 2-3 years of age. Older alpacas can be quite effective as guardians but learned behaviour relating to the environment in which they have grown, feed and management issues can modify protective instincts. A 6-8 year old alpaca for example, which has spent most of his life in a small paddock, hand fed an artificial concoction of supplementary feed, raised and regularly handled as a pet, may have very few protective instincts intact. A male castrated after several years of matings, may retain the mounting instinct as learned behaviour. Alpacas less than 18 months of age are not recommended for guardian work.

Guardian alpacas (excluding females of course) **must have been castrated**. Entire males are known to mount sheep. Just last week I was told of a case where a new owner was enthusiastically discussing his two alpacas with the owner of two other alpacas. Unfortunately the second owner was by then an ex-owner because he was sick and tired of his two wethers fighting and chasing the sheep - turns out he bought them as wethers but **they were entire**. Yes - he should have checked before he bought them but to sell non-castrated males as guardians is in clear contradiction to the AAA's recommendations. The reputation of the seller has suffered, but unfortunately so has the image of alpacas.

Guardian alpacas are normally promoted as hardy, easy to care for and that it's fine to be fed the same as the sheep. Therefore it is essential that alpacas sold as guardians are **strong, healthy and without conformation faults**. Overweight alpacas, those with poor mouths, those with bad legs, those susceptible to problems from injuries, are likely to break down in conditions where they have to travel kilometres each day and forage for their own food. Similarly, alpacas with muffled faces and fleece which impairs eyesight are not only more likely to be nervous and less effective as guardians, they are also likely to add an unwanted workload to their owners with extra clipping and grass seed problems. Farmers who purchase alpacas to guard their sheep usually do so for humane reasons - a pure distaste of foxes killing lambs, health concerns for the lactating ewes, and because they stand to gain financially from increased lambing rates. But from a practical aspect, it is unrealistic to expect them to regularly round up and yard their

sheep so that the guardian alpacas can have a jab of vitamin xyz, or to go out daily and hand feed special treats.

**Temperament** is important. Although guardian alpacas will spend most of their time out in the paddocks with the sheep they do need to be **manageable** when handled and as occasions dictate - like yarding or shearing time. Breeders and the industry will be judged on how they behave. A halter-trained alpaca is a bonus and certainly a factor appreciated by many farmers. On the other hand some alpacas have little respect for humans, some are too aggressive, some are too timid, some are extremely flighty, or kick or spit, when routines change.

It is important that all **information** relevant to each alpaca is provided to new owners. All alpacas should carry **identification**. It is the responsibility of livestock owners, including alpaca owners to guard against disease outbreaks and to adopt programs and management practices to minimize disease risks. Identification and trace back is part of the bigger livestock picture. **Health Status** details with verification should be provided and if appropriate fleece statistics.

Alpacas sold as guardians should be up to date with **vaccinations**; teeth and toenails should be attended to before delivery. They should be shorn or appropriate information provided.

In addition general husbandry information relevant to the health and welfare of alpacas should be given to new owners - like shearing techniques and sunburn dangers, high fibre dietary requirements, 5 in 1 vaccinations, teeth and toenail care, body scoring. A set of the *Alpacafacts Sheets*, or a copy of the new AAA publication, *'Managing Alpacas in Australia'*, is an easy way to address this.

When run with other livestock it is rare for alpacas to come into actual contact with others in their herd. Farmers can be assured of the low risk of fibre contamination as accepted by AWEX and they should be advised of shearing strategies to prevent problems. New owners who have some understanding of alpacas and their management are more likely to provide situations which lead to successful outcomes. It is not, for example, realistic to believe that all fox problems are going to be solved by simply putting a couple of alpaca wethers in with a mob of sheep.

For example, limited success could be expected if 300 ewes, which tended to break into a number of mobs, were lambing in a 250 acre paddock with several patches of scrub, and a known fox problem.

Finally - there are different opinions as to alpaca numbers per flock. **Two** appears to be the preferred number with most people agreeing that more than three increases the likelihood of the alpacas forming their own sub-herd. It also seems to make little difference whether there are 25 or 250 sheep - of more importance is whether or not the paddock is clear or broken up by scrub patches. Whatever the case, the alpacas must be compatible and tolerant of each other's company.

Ideally alpacas sold as guardians will quickly adjust to their new environment and within a few days will have accepted their new herd. They will instinctively adopt a protective role and will move with and be part of the flock.

Alpaca owners should not view the guardian alpaca market as the dumping ground for unwanted or problem alpacas. Perhaps the most powerful form of advertising is from satisfied customers, especially if it is by word of mouth. Success stories about alpaca guardians spread quickly. But so too do accounts of cases where alpacas have failed as guardians. In extreme cases dangerous situations are possible and these stories often tarnish the reputation of individual breeders, and also alpacas in general.

It is for this reason that only suitable alpacas should be sold to protect livestock - it is critical that alpacas are matched to suit their role as guardians, and at the same time impress as a hardy, easy to care for, easy to manage livestock option.

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