Module # 4 – Component # 3

Alpacas, Herdsmen & Donkeys

Introduction

Alpacas belong to the camelid family and are primarily fleece producing animals.

Like all camelids they are gregarious, intelligent, hardy and have a strong herding instinct. As a herder it will run an intruder down, stamp on it with its front legs, and spit at it. Males develop sharp fighting canines.

Alpacas can reside with the herd permanently, but are of particular value around lambing season. If the animals are to be used intermittently with the herd, it is important that they be introduced to the herd at least 6 – 8 weeks prior to lambing.

Alpacas are ruminants and browsers, with a lifespan of about 20 - 25 years. Alpacas have only been introduced into South Africa within the last 5 years, and their numbers are limited as the flocks are currently being bred up. They are either bred for fleece production or as guarding animals.

The meat is not currently eaten in SA, and the global population of alpacas is considered to be about 4 million. 75% of which are still in South America from where they originated, but both Australia and North America currently have herds of about 100 000.

Even-toed ungulates, they are classified in the Artiodactyla order, which include pigs, cattle, goats and antelope. They are part of the South American Camelid family, related to the Llama, vicugna and guanicoe.

There are 2 types of alpaca, the Suri and the Huacaya.

The Suri has long fibres like that of an angora goat, and the Huacaya has a more "fluffy" fibre, like that of a merino sheep. 80% of the alpacas globally are Huacaya.
They are hardy creatures originating from harsh conditions in South America. They can take extreme temperatures, although humidity is obviously not an ideal condition for them. It is natural for an Alpaca to wade into water and roll. As they have a dry fleece, maggots are not a problem, and therefore they do not have to be treated for this.

Alpacas are convenient animals to use as livestock guardians as they do not require any additional feeds (they live off the veld like the sheep or goats), and their fleece is a potential income earner. They have a long productive and guarding lifespan.

The Alpaca wool industry is in its infancy in South Africa, but it provides high quality fibre with excellent thermal qualities and is devoid of lanolin oil. It has been reported that fleece quality is equivalent to cashmere. Between 2 – 4 kg of fleece is produced and prices of R300/kg have been reported. An array of natural colours is produced from a light off-white to dark brown.

No extra facilities are required by the farmer to introduce the animals, and existing operations can continue as before.

**An Alpaca’s life span is about 20 - 25 years.**

The females have long gestation periods of about 11 months and fertility begins at two years of age. Only single offspring are conceived and mating can occur within weeks of birth, thus a single birth can be produced annually.
Guarding Livestock

The Alpaca “guards” by being a 24-hour watch guard. They are alert and curious animals, able to see well while standing tall. They can see an intruder at a distance. Alpacas have an inbred herding and protective instinct, much like Anatolian shepherd dogs and donkeys.

**They place themselves between the predator/intruder and their flock, and set off the alarm, which is a high-pitched sound. They approach what they consider to be a threat, and intimidate it by chasing and spitting at it. Being agile, they can run down most predators.**

They have the ability to kick with their hind feet, and will stomp on something that does not run away. Male alpacas have fighting teeth, and naturally in the wild, when fighting each other, will bite as a form of aggression.

This form of aggression has been a proven deterrent against jackal and caracal predation. It is unproven against larger predators like leopards and cheetahs.

There are 2 factors at work that make an Alpaca a successful guard:

- Its flock instinct is strong, i.e. it bonds with the sheep/goats as if they were their own and protects them; and
- It is a territorial animal. A male Alpaca marks its territory and patrols the area once it is established. An Alpaca has a distinct smell, and this alone is a communication of its presence to other animals that use smell, e.g. jackals and cats.

This method of protecting livestock has been used for more than 10 years already in Australia and for about 4 years in South Africa, and it continues to provide positive results. Where records are available, they have resulted in a 10 – 20% increase in lambing percentages.

**In some cases 80 - 90% improvement have been reported in predation control.**

Alpacas should have a working life of about 15 years.

On initial introduction to a herd, alpacas would tend to patrol the fence line and later associate with the herd more closely. They should never be kept alone as single animals.
Handling Alpacas

Research so far in South Africa has shown that the common denominator for success with these animals as guardians is to run them in a ratio of 2 alpacas per 250 ewes, on about 250 hectares. Where they are run on highly controlled areas, such as lands, success is greater than in extensive camps. It is recommended that alpacas are run in pairs.

The best facilities for working with and handling alpacas are cattle facilities. One can use sheep handling facilities, but usually the height of the fence is a bit low for an Alpaca, and it will easily jump over fences when stressed.

An Alpaca is an intelligent animal. Once they know the routine and layout of a property, they will easily lead the small stock and allow people to work with them. To restrain an Alpaca, it is best to get it into a small enclosure, and approach it from the side.

**Remember they do spit.** To hold an Alpaca, one takes it around the neck, high up, with one arm, holding the head against one’s shoulder, with the mouth pointing away from one’s face. The other hand can rest on the alpacas back, or hold its tail.

**DO NOT attempt to catch an Alpaca by its hind feet,** or to just hold its head. It will either kick or spit.

The Alpaca needs to be shorn annually, in spring. The fleece can be sold at present, although a national market does not yet exist. When transporting alpacas, do not put them on an open bakkie, as they will jump off. They usually lie down during transportation, so either a closed-in bakkie or a trailer is necessary.
Veterinary Care and Vaccinations

The veterinary care of alpacas is similar to sheep and cattle. Not all veterinarians are familiar with these animals, and it is important that farmers make contact with experienced Alpaca farmers or veterinarians to make sure that the correct regimes are followed.

Veterinarians may have to educate themselves and communicate with people experienced in caring for these animals.

Subcutaneous injections are given either on the inner hind leg or behind the shoulder. It is possible to drench an Alpaca. One just needs to remember that it will spit a lot back out again.

Alpacas may require trimming of toenails if they are not run on stony ground. Depending on their feed, they may also require incisors to be trimmed in time.

As this is just a guideline to the caring and handling of alpacas, the vaccinations that they need must always be checked with the local veterinarian for the area. Onderstepoort has information available on alpacas, so veterinarians do have access to this information. Enterotoximia, at least every 6 months, is necessary, no matter where in South Africa. The other vaccinations commonly given to alpacas are pasteurella, tetanus, glanvac, and anthrax. They should also be treated against external parasites, e.g. paralytic ticks, and where one finds a high degree of tick-born diseases. Alpacas do not appear to be susceptible to Blue Tongue Disease.

Alpacas are susceptible to the same variety of poisonous plants as other farming stock. It is also recommended that they should not have access to urea or rumensin found in licks.

Most veterinary products used on farming stock can be used on alpacas (anti-parasitic remedies and vaccines), although it is advisable to always check with your veterinarian first, and to not use the strongest products available, as it is generally not necessary.
Acquiring Alpacas

For the purpose of guarding small livestock, alpacas need to be at least 18 months old. It is recommended that they are **not used to defend stock until at least 12 months old**. It usually takes time for the Alpaca to mature into this role, being at least one full lambing season.

Since an Alpaca male is not truly mature until 3 to 4 years of age, its confidence and aggressive ability needs time to develop.

Due to the fact that it is estimated that there are only about 1 000 alpacas in SA (2008), not many are available for the purpose of guarding stock yet. Only “culled” or castrated males are used for this purpose.

There is an **Alpaca Breeders Society** associated to Studbook, where a list of stud breeders can be obtained. Tel: (051) 448 0772.

Contact details for Alpacas:
- Sally Kingwell
  Tel: (049) 840 0354 / 084 251 0426
  Email: aaks@adsactive.com

- James Brodie:
  Tel: 082 823 3835
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Herdsmen

Not long ago human shepherds were a common management tool to tend to livestock in the field and protect animals against predators. As farms got more extensive and labour costs and practices changed, this practice has all but disappeared.

Herdsmen remain a very effective means of herding livestock and managing flock, not forgetting an opportunity for job creation. They usually have their own dogs, which also act as herd guardians. Herdsmen should not be allowed to use their dogs to hunt or to hunt themselves. They have further value in being able to attend, recognise and deal with other management interventions, e.g. fencing repairs, sick animals as well as stock theft monitoring and prevention. Many of these proactive interventions can also reduce stock losses (for which predators are often wrongly blamed), and make the appointment of the “old style” herdsman a cost effective and efficient management tool.

In the current agricultural and political climate it may in fact be prudent and entirely appropriate that this method experiences resurgence. Incentives, profit sharing and partnerships are all options in this methodology, and as such provide the farmer with opportunities to use an age-old means in a new way to deal with empowerment imperatives and effective predator control. This method could have direct social, economic and environmental benefits.
Donkeys

Donkeys have traditionally been used as a means of transport. However, these animals have also proved themselves very efficient at chasing away predators and other intruders from their camps and territories. In Kenya, donkeys have even been used in some areas to guard cattle against lions. In areas where cattle are kept in fenced-off camps, only one or two donkeys are needed per herd of cattle.

Donkeys are naturally more alert and aware of predators than cattle and other livestock. They will find predators and chase them away. Being herd animals, if there are only one or two individuals, they will instinctively gravitate towards and remain with a herd for security.

Donkeys are also extremely protective of their foals, so a mare with a foal is an added advantage.

Stallions may break fences and become aggressive during breeding, kicking and biting livestock, so may not always be suitable. They may be particularly aggressive to calves, lambs and kids.

Mares are preferred over stallions, due to the aggressive behaviour of the stallions. Donkey foals should be raised with the livestock they will protect. They should be kraaled with the livestock at night.

Donkeys are ubiquitous throughout South Africa and the neighbouring countries. They may be a cost effective means of holistic predator control. The additional benefit of donkeys is that they are very hardy animals requiring no additional feed or expenses for the farmer.

In Switzerland, donkeys have even been successfully used to protect livestock against the European wolf and lynx.

Llamas and ostriches have been reported to provide similar protection.