

## Alpacas as herdguards

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*The Cape winter with heavy rains and snow on our local mountain ranges is like home for the resilient alpaca. They originate in the high Andean Plateau regions of South America, the Altiplano, with extreme daily temperatures and freezing winds. Yet, they withstand these conditions well and also adapt to our arid hinterland where commercial farmers keep their flocks of sheep in vast camps.*

I first imported alpacas to South Africa in November 2000, starting an industry that has grown from sixty alpacas to an estimated 3000. A breeders' club has transformed to a society, under the auspices of the SA Stud Book and Livestock Improvement Society. Alpacas remain "exotics" and have to compete with our indigenous game when a farmer is seeking to diversify. We have one Minimill that buys in or processes our fibre. In the current economic climate breeding stock are slow to sell, but alpacas as herd guards are both in demand and a lucrative spin-off to the industry. Wethers are sold for R7500, and as a comparison a young pregnant female goes R28,000 - R40,000.

In a recent booklet distributed to farmers by the conservationist group The Landmark Foundation, the alpacas were promoted together with guarding dogs (especially the Anatolian shepherds), donkeys and efficient herdsman as the recommended guardians against predators. In South Africa these are mainly the jackal and rooikat. Losses in the lambing season are reported to be in excess of 30% to predators. Dogs have some limitations requiring special training, feed and sometimes aggression to even farm labourers. Alpacas are then promoted as a non-lethal management of farm predation. We are fortunately moving away from snares and entrapment that causes suffering.

I get interesting feedback. The latest was a farmer that entered his one camp with two dogs where alpacas were guarding sheep. They stormed towards him when he expected them to retire seeing the dogs, and they stood their ground preventing him leaving the camp. He had to radio for motorbike mounted assistance to "escape". He bought another five wethers the following week! Another amazing story was when a troop of baboons were threatening a herd of lambing sheep. The alpacas herded the sheep in a close group – strength in numbers – and remained between them and the threat until they dispersed. Another alarming story was how an over petted, bottle fed alpaca developed severe aggression when it matured; so much so that the only safe way to enter it's camp was on horseback. This behaviour is unusual, but it did help convince the sceptics of the alpacas' potential as protectors on a commercial farm.

Alpacas operate as guardians as they are alert and with their good eyesight can see an intruder at a distance. They approach what they consider a threat and intimidate it by chasing and spitting at it.



Being agile, they can run down most predators. They also have the ability to kick, stomp on something that does not give way, use their fighting teeth to bite and give their high pitched alarm call. Alpacas are territorial and patrol fences and, what is underestimated, is that they have a distinct smell. Jackal and cats communicate or sense the presence of other animals by smell. Alpacas also keep the herd they are guarding together. The stragglers are the vulnerable targets to opportunistic predators.

In South Africa we are recommending that alpacas work in pairs protecting 250 ewes on about 250 hectares. Rohan Dalgeish is doing research in Victoria, Australia, on alpacas as guardians with controlled comparisons of guarded vs unguarded herds, alpacas working singularly or in pairs, wether sheep breed have an influence, or in fact the colour of the alpaca. Also the influence of the terrain, maximum size of camp an alpaca can manage etc.

Farmers are seeing the advantage of alpacas as guardians and now purchasing breeding stock to supply their own needs. They adapt well to grazing and browsing the 'veld' as do the sheep they guard, and I am told most alpacas retain good condition on what appears sparse vegetation.

Since alpaca fibre is slow to make its mark in a world moving away from natural fibres, where else lays the sustainability of our industry? Herd guards work. Their meat? – La Viande in Australia promotes this as an alternative. Stock theft is a huge problem in our country, so this could never be an option. Many breeders warn staff that alpaca meat is unpalatable like donkey, makes you infertile and tastes as bad, as their spit smells!

I chatted to Dalena White, representing SA Merino, at the "From the Earth" Expo at the CTICC recently. She mentioned the strong lobby group opposed to predation control that might involve their suffering. If the alpacas can be used as a deterrent, a 'green' alternative, one could have another group converted to the use of natural wool fibre. We also discussed the advantages of a possible Merino/alpaca blend, targeting the top luxury wool market.

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