



Alpaca History

Alpacas are one of the domesticated members of the camel (camelid) family which also includes llamas, guanacos, and vicunas from South America, and the Bactrian and Dromedary camels from Asia and Africa. This family of animals originated on the plains of North America about 10 million years ago. It is presumed that migration northward across the Bering land bridge into Asia formed the ancestry of the Old World camelids (Bactrian and Dromedary). These camelids became highly adapted to desert climatic conditions.

Southerly migration into the South American Andes formed the ancestry of the guanaco and vicuna, which adapted to the harsh climate, sporadic moisture, high elevations, large daily temperature fluctuation, and unpredictable food supply of the region. Both these wild species still live in the Andes today.

The alpaca, has played an important role in the life of the people of the Andean highlands for a long time. Through archeological excavations, it is estimated that the alpaca as we know it has been domesticated since 4000-5000 B.C. It was an important aspect of the everyday life of the ancient civilizations in the region which comprises of southeast Peru, eastern Bolivia and northern Argentina and Chile.

Alpaca is a Spanish word derived from the Aymara name allpacu or the Quechua names pacos or pacoshas. The Aymara and Quechua people are today's traditional owners of Alpacas. Like their Inca forefathers, many of today's highland pastoralists collect their llamas, load them with highly prized alpaca fiber, woven cloth, dried meat and sacks of dried potatoes. Then they trek for days to the villages in more temperate lower elevations, where they trade their goods for grains and produce. Movement of goods between highland herders, farmers of the temperate Andean valleys and coastal fishermen was crucial to the development of Andean cultures, which culminated with the Inca Empire (1438-1532).

The domestication of the alpaca reached its highest point during the Inca Empire,—the “Llama-michis”, a quechua term for llama herders — was in charge of the breeding and exploitation of llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas. The vicuñas and the alpacas provided fiber for clothing that was a sign of social status. Thus there was “gami,” an alpaca cloth that was used by high-ranking officials and nobility, and “campi”, a vicuña cloth for the exclusive use of the Incan nobility.

The llama originating from the guanaco was bred specifically to produce a large, strong animal for the packing function. The alpaca was selectively bred from the vicuna, to accentuate its naturally finer wool. The harvest of this fine wool served as the base for a significant domestic textile market. The role that alpacas and llamas played in the Incan culture and economy naturally elevated them to a highly regarded status. Husbandry and management practices were very sophisticated for that period of history.

When the Spaniards arrived in 1531, they found this well organized society, but failed to appreciate its culture. Pizarro and only a handful of men put an end to the Incan empire more than 470 years ago.

The alpaca that had been a central part of the Inca social and religious practices was almost exterminated to make room for European domestic animals (horses, cows, sheep). But the highland inhabitants, knowing the importance of the alpaca, managed to move higher into the mountains to keep their herds, ultimately saving the species from extinction, but not before a great number of the animals was lost to hunting and disease.

With the Spanish conquest of the Incas came the almost total annihilation of the alpaca. This wonderful animal survived only because of its importance to the Indian people and its incredible ability to live at altitudes and under conditions which cannot sustain the life of other domestic animals.

Exiled to the upper regions of their natural territory, the llama and alpaca lan-

guished as second-rate citizens while the sophisticated husbandry and management systems, were lost amid Spanish prejudice and misunderstanding. The wild vicuna and guanaco were hunted to the point of extinction for their fine pelts and to eliminate competition with domestic stock. The llama and alpaca became animals of the poor and formed the base of a subsistence culture for the natives of the high puna.

Rediscovery of the alpaca's fine wool by the international textile market in the late 1800s led to a higher level of interest in the alpaca, in turn regaining its prominence. In recent times, Peruvians have sought to protect the Alpaca Industry. In 1827, Simon Bolivar (the South American Liberator) signed a decree to protect all camelids, which include alpaca, llama, guanaco and vicuna. Since then, alpacas have been treated as a unique and essential resource.

From the estimated 40-50 million alpacas in the pre-colonial times, in 1980 there were 2.5 million alpacas in Peru, and the numbers have not significantly increased since. So the alpaca remains a rare animal today.

The alpaca has slowly been introduced to the rest of the world, but Peru still has 70-80% of the population, Bolivia approximately 20%, and Chile 2%. The first alpacas imported to the United States arrived in 1983 from Bolivia and Chile. It was illegal to export alpacas from Peru until 1991. Peru was the last South American country to open its borders to exportation and only 3,000 alpacas have actually left Peruvian soil. These animals are now being raised in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia,

as well as others in Europe, and account for only 0.1% of the entire alpaca population in the world. Today, there is worldwide commerce in the alpaca and its products.

So the North American Alpaca is very young, and because of the dedication and care of the American breeders, numbers in the USA are slowly increasing, and the quality of the stock and fiber is improving due to careful selective breeding.