



FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

Industry Future

In Search of Sea Change

So you have paid off the kids' education and resolved the repercussions of the first spouse. Hope has triumphed over experience and you are comfortably entrenched in another relationship. You have sold your business interests well, cashed in your Sydney home for a sum that seems obscene, settled your mortgage, rolled over your super, and retired from the rat race.

You are feeling pretty pleased with yourself. You are cashed up, secure, and looking for a sea change.

You trawled Europe on a shoestring and a wink 30 years ago, and are now too used to the good life to contemplate carrying anything heavier than a shirt on your back. The distant bugle, whose plaintiff refrain once beckoned you to explore exciting and unknown shores, now sounds an alarm that alerts you to threats of terror on even the familiar ones. Australia is looking secure, comfortable, predictable, affordable, warm, familiar, and more suited to your phlegmatic disposition. Did I mention affordable?

You have done the trip around Australia in the campervan, but balked at the driveway to the retirement village. Fishing, surfing and golf are great in your time off, but hardly justify a purposeful awakening each morning, and a hearty meal and well-earned sleep at the end of the day. The holiday house is great for seven days, but boring after eight.

What now?

The country life beckons: clean air, the wide open spaces, and only the wind in the trees and the lowing of the cattle to disturb your thoughts. The freedom to get down and dirty. Where clothes, like wine, get better with age and fashion is measured by the number of holes in your work hat. Where you can talk about the weather with a solemnity that invokes awe and respect amongst sunbathing suburban folk, and the problems of international markets, plague locusts and drought seem somehow more real and immediate than those of the real estate market, peak hour traffic and water restrictions. The price of a modest weatherboard home on a hundred acres makes the sale of your city property look even more obscene, and already you are feeling the warm inner glow of being a landholder and primary producer, feeding the nation.

Hang on. Producing what? Well, the last bloke ran a few thousand sheep and some beef cattle, so that'll do. Mind you, he subdivided his 2000 acres to sell you your 100 acres, and although the fences are OK and you have a few sheds, he still has the cattle yards. He seemed to make a living off his 2000 acres. Still, his lifestyle has never been so good since he sold off a few 100 acre lots. Seems he's playing a bit more golf and bowls these days, and has lost interest in trying to make a quid from farming.

*Come to think of it, what **can** you run on 100 acres? 80 fine wool sheep? 50 fat lambs? lambs? 30 breeding cows? A partridge in a pear tree? How can you make a living out of that? What will the taxman have to say about your business plan? And how long do you intend to keep working your investment? "Till it's all gone" as the joke goes?*

So you sell up, move into a modest apartment back in the city, join the local bowling club, play bridge on Wednesdays, and read Town and Country Farmer on the weekends, contemplating what might have been.



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Sound familiar? It is a road travelled by many middle-aged retirees, if not in *fact*, then at least notionally, when they pull out of the rat race and dream about a life in the country. *But it doesn't have to remain a dream.* For many, there has been a real transformation, a real sea change, which sees their dream become a reality. How?

Alpacas.

Alpacas? Why alpacas, you say? Isn't that just another sunrise, boom and bust primary industry, run by accountants for CBD professionals with a four wheel drive and a pair of moleskins?

The answer is a resounding *no!* The Australian alpaca industry is a mature, well organised, and rapidly developing primary industry, one that has developed an amazing degree of infrastructure and organisation since the first alpacas entered the country in 1989. It now boasts an organisation, the Australian Alpaca Association (AAA), founded in 1992, and today housed in its own million dollar premises in Melbourne. The AAA today represents nearly 2000 members and 1600 registered herds across every state of the Commonwealth, with regional committees meeting regularly across the nation.

Its list of achievements in 12 years is as impressive as it is progressive. The AAA sponsors a biennial national seminar, with overseas guest speakers. It publishes a quarterly colour magazine and biannual newsletters for its members. It administers the International Alpaca Register (IAR), tracing the pedigrees of registered alpacas back to the foundation stock. It has designed and is implementing an Across-herd Genetic Evaluation (AGE) program, linked to the IAR, to accelerate genetic improvement in the Australian alpaca. It has negotiated strategic partnerships with the New Zealand Alpaca Association to strengthen our industry in the international market. It has commissioned an independent and professional report by ACIL (2001) on the viability of the Australian Alpaca industry to strengthen its members' position with the Australian Taxation Office. It established a Strategic Development Task Force which has produced the Vision 2020 report on the status, direction and future opportunities for the industry over the next twenty years. It has employed marketing consultants to oversee the strategic marketing and promotion of the breed to the public. It conducts an annual National Show and Sale, now in its 11th year, to showcase the industry to primary producers and to the Australian and international public. It conducts an annual fleece sampling survey to benchmark the Australian herd. It has established Australian Alpaca Fibre Ltd (AAFL) to receive, class and sell Australian alpaca fibre, and has developed strategic commercial partnerships with purchasers of alpaca fleece and manufacturers of alpaca products. It administers a comprehensive web page encompassing online registration of matings, births and transfers, access to the IAR register, a members' message board and discussion page, educational material, reports on National Committee meetings, show rules and results, breed standards, AAA regulations, a breeder directory, industry news, and a business plan.



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ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AAA

- Ownership of AAA offices and building
- International Alpaca Registry
- Across-herd Genetic Evaluation program
- Alpacas Australia magazine
- AAA Newsletter
- AAA web site
- Online registration
- Australian Alpaca Fibre Limited
- Strategic industry partnerships
- Strategic cooperation with NZAA
- Annual National Show and Sale
- ACIL Alpaca Industry Viability report (2001)
- Strategic Development Task Force Vision 2020 report (2003)
- Annual Fleece Sampling Survey
- Appointment of National Marketing consultants
- Draft certificate course in Agriculture (Alpaca Management)
- National guidelines for showing and judging of alpacas

This busy agenda reflects the expectations and demands of its growing membership, and an Australian herd of nearly 60,000 registered alpacas. Australian breeders have exported alpacas to New Zealand, Canada, USA, Britain, China, South Africa and Germany.

Alpacas are no longer a sunrise industry. Fifteen years on, the industry need no longer respond to predictions of boom and bust. Alpacas are here to stay.

Still, I hear you repeat, *why alpacas?*

Well, there are so many answers it is difficult to suggest just one.

In the context of the “sea changers”, the answer is that you don’t need a broad-acre farm to get established in the alpaca industry. Nor do you need a herd of 100 alpacas to be taken seriously, either within the industry or by the tax department. The average Australian herd is still less than 20 animals, and with prices ranging from a few thousand to fifty thousand dollars for a breeding female, and up to \$150,000 for a stud male (one recently sold in the USA for \$US400,000), new buyers can choose their entry level in terms of both numbers and quality.

Buying an alpaca is not like buying a Merino sheep. The wool industry in Australia has a 200 year history of accumulated knowledge and breeding, and a new sheep breeder has a lot of catching up to do, with many older breeders boasting several generations of experience. It seems unlikely that the new entrant can ever hope to catch up, let alone make an impact on the industry or a major contribution to industry development. In alpacas, the most venerable Australian breeders have less than twenty years of knowledge and experience, and the book of Australian alpaca knowledge has yet to be written. Any alpaca breeder, starting today, can aspire to make a contribution to that book.

But internationally, Australia starts with a significant advantage. That, in part, is the country’s proud record in the Merino wool industry. Two hundred years ago, Australians imported the Spanish-bred Merino sheep, adapted it to the Australian climate and pasture, and created an industry that is, today, unassailably the standard for world’s best practice. In the process, Australia has also accumulated the world’s greatest experience and knowledge in the care, husbandry and breeding of fibre-bearing animals, and applied to the industry the scientific



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method and research of its internationally recognized veterinarians and agricultural scientists. Today, Australia has the largest national herd of alpacas to be found outside of South America. This is the same country that has the world's greatest understanding and experience in the production of wool for commercial textiles.

If this is not reason enough for optimism, consider that Australia enjoys a status in the world of being relatively disease-free, with a stable government and economy, free of entrenched political corruption, and has well established trade links to Asia, Europe and North America by sea and air. For any country looking to import alpacas, Australia is destined to become the preferred starting point. The foresight of the AAA in establishing a national program for accelerated genetic improvement (the AGE), linked to a pedigree register that includes the vast majority of Australian alpacas, will guarantee Australia "favoured nation" status.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, what advantages do alpacas offer? Well, for a start, they are what we often designate "designer green." Their soft, padded feet are gentle on fragile Australian soils, a huge advantage over traditional Australian livestock, including sheep, cattle, goats, pigs and horses. They are approximately 30% more efficient in extracting nutrition from pasture than sheep, and do well on native grasses as well as improved pasture. They are, like their camel cousins, able to withstand dry conditions for longer than other livestock. They do not graze pasture as low as sheep, and are thereby less likely to render land vulnerable to erosion. They use communal dung piles, to which they return to urinate and defaecate, and are therefore less prone to develop worm problems than sheep or cattle in comparable paddocks. Their fleece is very low in oil (lanolin), and they are therefore rarely affected by fly-strike. Their perianal skin is free of fleece, and they do not therefore require mulesing or crutching like sheep. They have adapted their reproductive system to the high altitude of the South American Andes, and usually give birth during the first few hours of sunlight, when cria (babies) are least likely to succumb to cold or predators (pumas). They are very social animals with strong herd instincts, and their protective behaviour has been adapted to their common use as herd guardians in protecting flocks of sheep from predation by foxes. They are long lived (up to 20 years), and females are frequently fertile for up to 15 years. Finally, they are naturally curious and sociable animals, easily herded and handled, respectful of normal fencing, and requiring no specialized handling equipment.

But there's more! It is no coincidence that the Australian alpaca industry is strongly represented by women, who are frequently the stud managers of the herds. It is not patronizing to women to say that alpacas are animals which lend themselves better than almost any other to handling and management by women, without the need for physical size or strength to achieve one's objectives. Alpacas have a nature that is curious, but usually very gentle, and rarely confronting, and they respond favourably to gentle handling and treatment. They are rarely a threat to women, children or infants, and most women can undertake all the tasks related to their care and husbandry without difficulty, and without danger to attendant infants and children.

OK, so alpacas are environmentally friendly animals, with high intrinsic value, easily managed by one or two handlers without unnecessary force, suitable for small farms, requiring no highly specialised or expensive infrastructure, suitable for primary producers with little or no prior livestock experience, with significant commercial potential. They are safe with children, and come in a range of designer colours. Is that it?

Well, just about. But there is one more major advantage to alpacas, one of common interest to all breeders, whether they are serious stud breeders, commercial breeders, or just interested in showing this enchanting and captivating animal.

That's *lifestyle*. Talk to any alpaca breeder, whether they have two or two hundred alpacas, and you will instantly sense their passion about the animals, and their commitment to the



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industry. It's contagious. In such a young industry, there is so much to discover, so much to learn, and there are so many opportunities to be taken. The country lifestyle, the shows, the seminars, the auctions, the farm visits, and the industry occasions: all are a part of the social fabric that is "breeding alpacas". It includes the friendships with a diverse range of people with equally diverse backgrounds and interests, bonded by the common enthusiasm they hold for alpacas. Those friendships extend internationally as much as they do interstate, with the option to travel across Australia and overseas on alpaca business, building relationships and exploring new opportunities. It is an industry for everyone, with opportunities for all, and every new entrant brings with them into the industry insights, expertise and experiences from other walks of life, all of which have some part to play in building the industry. And that enthusiasm is reflected in the involvement of breeders, old and new, in the committee structure at regional and national level, all making their contribution to the future Book on the Australian Alpaca. Whether we start life as electricians, judges, farmers, milkmen, nurses, business executives, doctors, soldiers, sailors, politicians, plumbers, vets or vandals, there is a place and a role for us in the alpaca industry.

I frequently explain to new investors: Time passes. Read a book, play golf, sail the ocean, sleep, watch TV, or collect butterflies. But rest assured time will pass. Better to spend it on an adventure that is fun, educational, constructive, pioneering, and lucrative, and may one day provide jobs for your children and export dollars for your country, than to squander it on meaningless indulgences or fruitless enterprises.

Try a sea change. See the change. Get into alpacas, and *join the adventure*.

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