

Mythical Suri

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Suri are a beautiful elegant breed, immediately loved by some, and with growing appeal to others. Suri fleece is one of the world's rarest and most beautiful natural fibres, valued for its unsurpassed lustre and exquisite handle. The inherent properties give luxurious softness and sensuous handle to suri products. The superior thermal traits and beautiful, natural drape make the fibre a dream to wear.

History

Suri are a breed of alpaca originating from the Nunoa Valley in Peru. Before 1500AD and the Spanish Invasion of South America, suri were farmed with strict practices by the Inca where breeding was highly organised. Fleece from suri was reserved for Royalty only.

After the invasion interrupted life in Peru, the art of breeding was lost and suri, along with other alpaca, were scattered and displaced by sheep and cattle. Their value was unrecognised by the invading Spaniards.

It was not until 60 years ago in the 1950's that the quality of suri was once again recognised by some forward thinking breeders in Peru, such as Don Julio Berreda at Accoyo, and organised breeding was once again established.

Present

In Peru suri are still scarce, and make up approximately 3% of the world alpaca population, but 10% of the NZ alpaca population. Suri fleece is in high demand in the fashion world. In Peru, making use of higher micron fibre, it is almost exclusively made into high fashion coats sold to the rich and famous, the fabric is brushed to resemble fur. It is referred to as 'Green Fur', as the animal still lives.

NZ has some of the best suri in the world, but only a tiny amount of suri fleece is produced, making it very precious.

Future

New Zealand has already been at the forefront of producing ground breaking fine fabric from fine suri fleece and stands to make a commercial breakthrough in processing techniques and world haute couture using this magnificent unique fibre.

We have a fantastic opportunity to build on the work already done in New Zealand, and create a suri industry based on quality stock and a real future, but sadly there are still some who perpetuate the myths that suri can't be farmed in the colder southern regions, are more badly behaved, and you can't process the fleece. As passionate suri breeders and drawing on our years of experience we are going to dispel these myths.

The Myths

We have been breeding alpacas for over 13 years and suri for over 10 years, during this time we have observed our animals and the ones we visit on other farms around the world in the hope of learning more about breeding and farming better.

Climate

Our initial move into suri was motivated not only by the exquisite fibre properties but by a feeling that suri would cope better with the humid conditions of the Far North, where we farmed at that time. Our experiences have shown that not only did suri cope better with the humidity, they also fare better in the high rainfall area of Rotorua where we now farm. The parted hanging style of fleece means the water is shed straight off the body, and does not pool creating caved in pockets leading to fleece rot. Open a suri fleece after rain and the inside will still be dry.

Many say, that suri can't cope in the cold, but we have seen no evidence of this, quite to the contrary we believe these very hardy animals will thrive in almost any environment. We do get quite cold here in Rotorua, with no issues for the suri, and we also believe they are successfully bred in south of the country. We recently exported a group to Sweden and have received reports that they are happily rolling in the snow.

Behaviour

I am constantly hearing huacaya breeder say suri are more flighty than huacaya, this is just lack of knowledge. Maybe it is just the fact the suri fleece sways and ripples as they shift exaggerating any movement. After years of dealing with both suri and huacaya on farm, in shows and mobile mating, we have found absolutely no difference in their behaviour. Some are easy to manage and some aren't from both types. Both suri and huacaya can seem more skittish if their fleece covers their eyes, so it is a good idea to trim the bonnet if this is a problem.

Fibre Processing

The idea that you can't process fine suri has been pretty much put to bed by the "Surissimo" suri fabric trial (see article in New Zealand Alpaca Winter 2010).

The challenges now are to find the options for processing and to get people to breed more suri of the quality required for processing. We have the stock in New Zealand of the quality required to lift the herd, we just need to get people to think about fibre when making their breeding decisions.

From a product marketing point of view, suri have an advantage over huacaya as their market image has not been tainted by poor quality Peruvian products. We need to build on this and ensure products are all of a high standard when branded as suri.

New Zealand has a unique opportunity to develop all aspects of the suri industry from breeding through to producing high value products. We just need to believe we can do it and get behind each other and work together.