



Coloured Suris

William Barnett DVM has been asked many times to write about his suri alpaca experiences. His response is to shy away from the request because of a fear of writing or public speaking. He says it comes from growing up with animals more than people. Well, AWM has persuaded him to put pen to paper and here he shares with us a tale of his continuing suri passion.

I have always had a passion and interest for all living creatures, especially the cursorial (running) mammals. It was easy for me to be attracted to camelids, especially the suri. It all started in about 1987, I had been raising llamas and a few alpacas for about four years. I received some pictures of suris from South America. They were all white and fairly uniform in phenotype. Just looking at the pictures made me tingle with excitement and filled with an urge to become involved with them. I was fascinated like a child with a new toy. After researching the possibility of exporting some out of South America, it was apparent at that time that it was not possible as the Peruvian and Bolivian governments would not allow export and Chile had no suri at the time.

In 1991, after four years of pursuing this goal, I did manage to bring into the USA 107 Suri females and 8 suri males out of Bolivia. It was a roller coaster ride all the way to the Harry S. Truman Animal Import Center (HSTAIC) located in Florida. Despite the many near impossible obstacles, my dream had come true. Most of the group of suris were white in colour with only a handful that were light fawn females. My next natural thought was to introduce colour into the herd. This was to be a formidable task. The two South American countries with suris – Bolivia and Peru – had mostly white for the commercial textile market. What were we to do? The answer was to scan the countryside of Peru and Bolivia in search of the rare coloured suri?

In 1993, we were permitted to export some Suri out of Peru. In this group of Suris, we were only able to collect two fawn Suri males and a few fawn Suri females. In 1994, we imported 215 Suris (162 white, 40 light fawn and 13 brown). This exemplifies the rarity of the coloured Suri. We had dedicated a lot of man power, money, and time to the collection. Subsequent imports from Bolivia, Peru and recently Chile in the latter half of the 1990's produced more Suris and more variety of colour. Now the USA has a strong foundation herd of 8,000 Suris representing about 40% that are coloured. We have picked over the three South American countries for some of the best genetics and production of coloured Suris. This makes the USA a viable world leader in conservation, production and advancement of the coloured suri.

From my alpaca collection from Bolivia, I set aside a group of suri (80% of which are coloured) to bring to the United Kingdom and Europe. This group sets the foundation as the first large herd of coloured Suris. It is my intention to continue to improve them.

The North American reception was totally unexpected. When I arrived with the first herd of suri to appear on North American soil in 1991, I thought I would have to reject the mass of interested individuals wanting to purchase this rare and elegant suri. I erroneously assumed everyone would realize the high value in these rare alpacas. Interest was rather slow at first with mostly people of business background and independent thinkers purchasing them. However, after the sale of a group of about twenty suri, the publicity and exposure brought increased demand. I believe we will see the same phenomenon in the UK and Europe. With any new product like a new imported fruit, new style car, or new investment people want the comfort of a proven track record and peer approval. The suri currently has great demand

indeed in North America and holds the record for the highest selling alpaca in the world. Cantano of Peru, a maroon suri stud of extreme quality sold for \$265,000 in 2002. Suris, especially coloured suris, are now the hot item. In the USA they sell for \$15-30,000 with rose-grey, silver-grey, and black selling for even higher prices.

The herd I have in England consists presently of 237 Suri (214 coloured and 23 white). The colour variation in the herd will produce all twenty-two colours recognized by the South American textile industry. Genghis Khan my number one stud is a superior male for the following reasons:

1. Very high fertility – positive pregnancy rate in a short period of time to a large number of females
2. Suri fibre dominance – 100% Suri offspring This is my first factual experience that this in fact can occur. This dominance mechanism is not simple mendelian inheritance with one gene as the offspring from different studies will show.
3. High consistency in phenotype with classic Suri look
4. Passes on a variety of colours and little solid white 6%

We are also breeding with four or five other coloured males in 2003. Our goal is to produce as close to 100% colour as possible. We will also be working toward breeding true for a single colour. I may never live to see this but it is a worthy goal. Nature can fool you as to expectations. Statistics on coloured suri fibre characteristics and reproduction are sparse. There is a lot of unknown, but the future will now provide more due to record keeping, registry data, and interest. The opportunities are endless and the future exciting.

Appearance

Animal lovers first view of the suri alpaca in full fibre is one of fascination. There is no other animal on the planet other than a special breed of sheep, called the Wensleydale, with this appearance. Don Julio Barreda, whom I first met at the 1992 AlpacaFest in Oregon and learned a lot from, can describe this fascination in a grand way as no other person can. I had recently imported the first suris into the North American continent and displayed them at AlpacaFest 92 and was eager to listen to Don Julio. What causes this fascination is its striking physical appearance being unsurpassed in style and elegance. It is not cute and cuddly as the huacaya but proud and elegant displaying a well balanced athletic body structure adorned with long shiny dripping locks of fibre that moves like tall grass in the wind as the suri moves. The suri portrays the look of light footed agility to which it lives up to. In contrast to the huacaya the suri visually appears to have a longer ear and neck, and in general, a more consistently straight back and legs. The longer ear is a visual illusion, however due to the flatter more compact top notch fibre of the suri, exposing more ear compared to the lofty (fluffy) spongy huacaya top knot hiding some of the base of the ear. Dr Bravo et al made measurements of 588 alpacas in Peru. They found the huacaya and suri ear to be the same length.

It appears that there is less variety in the suri than the huacaya. My theory, for this more consistent morphology maybe that the suri is more recently domesticated than the huacaya and therefore retains more of the genetic material of its former wild ancestors, most likely the vicuña, or maybe a predecessor of the vicuña. To reinforce this theory all one needs to do is find a herd of vicuña in the altiplano and follow them noticing the lack of variety due to natural selection. At first when initially disturbed the herd will move away from you allowing you to view the rear leg conformation and movement (gait). All will be visually near identical. As they settle down (less disturbed) and turn sideways, you will notice a lot more morphology (conformation) which is uniform among members. Front view movements and conformation are harder to obtain but from what I have seen all front legs are uniformly straight. When man does the selection the result is more variety.

The Origin

The origin of the domesticated suri is unknown and could date back to between 6000 and 7000 years ago determined by excavated alpaca remains in the central Peruvian Puna (Wheeler 1984, 1986). There are no written histories. Other authorities place their origin in more recent times by analysis of cave drawing and ancient pottery. Its ancestral predecessors

is considered the vicuña or the predecessor of the vicuña by most scholars. Exact evolution is unknown. The name 'suri' comes from the common name of the lesser Rhea due to this birds straight shiny feathers. 'suri' also means straight in the Aymaran language.

Suri Population

Suri population censuses quoted from various authorities run across the board from 1% to 4% of the alpaca populations. World renowned, Dr. Julio Sumar, has been extensively involved with alpacas and feels strongly that the suri population in Peru is around 1%. If you pick, just to be safe, the high of 4% the suri population worldwide would be approximately 120,000. This is about half that of the vicuña population of 250,000. Estimates of the number of coloured suris is 5% of the total world suri population which leaves approximately 6000 coloured suri world wide. This is a staggeringly small number. This scarcity becomes reality when searching for coloured suri in Peru and Bolivia, for one has to comb hundreds of square miles of specific locations to find a few coloured suri.

September 1999 Alpaca Market Report by International Alpaca Association – Don Julio notes the suris slow disappearance during the past thirty years and challenges all groups with interest to form a programme of recovery for the suri alpaca. As quoted by Don Julio Barreda, 'Nevertheless, it depends mainly on us, the breeders to bring about the recovery of this beautiful animal that once appeared to have fallen from the sky like hail as a gift to the Ccollas, Quechuss and Aymaras and today needs to be shared with the whole world'.

Suri Fibre Coverage and Characters

In general, the more coverage (except for face and ears) and the more distinct the lock formation, the better. This however appears to have no relationship to fineness or value to the processor, but gives the stamp of good suri genetics – at least from the phenotypic evidence. The fleece should have high lustre and a good soft and silky handle. Many forms of lock architecture exist in the suri fleece. For example, locks can be straight, twisted (more preferred), flat or curled and combinations of these. The individual fibres of all these are equally able to be processed. The lock should be evident as close to the body as possible. The staple should hang freely and part easily. The growth rate of suri fibre is 10–16 cm per year.

Suri Fibre Special Properties

1. 30-35 micron suri fibre can have as soft a handle as 16.5 micron cashmere.
2. Soft handle is due to the flat thin scales on the fibre surface which gives off a brilliant lustre.
3. The longer fibres of the Suri in clothing items prevent pilling (which occurs in cashmere, camel, and vicuna clothing).
4. Suri has an unusually high tensile strength.
5. Suri fibre is most similar to kid mohair in terms of slip during processing. This can be overcome by humidifying the process area.
6. Suri fibre is best used in the worsted process as it displays it's lustre well. As a napped fabric, it is one of the most luxurious.