

The Alpaca Fibre Industry

Alpacas are members of the Camelid family, originating from the Andes region in South America. Before the Spanish conquest, their fleece was known as the "Fibre of the Gods". Only Inca royalty were allowed to wear this luxurious fibre, upon pain of death.

Alpaca fibre is a soft, lightweight, lustrous fibre, second only to silk for strength, comparable to cashmere for luxury and more durable than both. It is thermally efficient and does not pill like cashmere. It is also much more acceptable on the skin for those with an allergic reaction to wool, due to its special characteristics. The fibre comes in 22 natural colours, including a true rich black, through chocolate brown and russet, as well as various shades of grey, honey and fawn, to a light champagne and finally pure white. Textile quality fibre will typically have a fineness in the range 18 – 28 microns.

Breeding quality alpacas currently command relatively high prices because suitable animals are in short supply and their fibre continues to be in high demand. Producing an average of 2-3 kilograms of fleece per year, alpacas are economical to care for requiring only marginal land for grazing. They also have virtually no environmental impact on their pasture land, since unlike goats, they are a grazer with a split upper lip, bottom teeth and dental gums on the top, which prevent them from damaging vegetation roots. And as the alpaca has pads, not hooves on its feet, there is less damage to the pasture surface which allows faster re-growth.

Peru is currently the only major world producer of fibre, with a national herd of roughly 3 million animals producing 3500 tonnes of fibre of an estimated world production of a little over 4000 tonnes. However, Peru has limited scope to expand production further owing to the limitations on available grazing in the Altiplano regions. Bolivia, the only other significant producer is in a similar situation with little room for expansion of their alpaca herd.

It seems clear therefore that any major expansion of the world alpaca herd will most likely take place outside South America. Starting from zero in the late 1980's, Australia has built up a substantial national herd numbering around 40,000 animals, with current fibre production estimated at 60 tonnes. The USA produces about 40 tonnes.

Projected growth rates are substantial, around 25 - 30% p.a., benefiting in particular from the easy availability of cheap, low-quality grazing land in these countries. Australia expects to support a herd of 200,000 animals by 2007, producing 500 tonnes of fibre. However, natural limitations on alpaca breeding rates (only one offspring per year, artificial insemination not yet viable) and restricted import availability, means that the supply of animals outside South America, although steadily increasing, will remain severely limited relative to the expected demand for many years to come.

After a slow start, the number of alpacas in the UK is increasing rapidly. There are now over 200 breeders, with a national herd of 4000 animals growing by a third each year in addition to special imports aimed at improving the quality of the existing bloodlines. A number of organisations have been created to support the industry, including the British Alpaca Society, the British Alpaca Fine Fibre Company and the British Alpaca Fibre Co-operative.

Although UK fibre production is still quite small, at around 6 tonnes, it is already the largest indigenous producer of a natural luxury fibre, having overtaken national production of cashmere and mohair by both volume and value in the last couple of years.