

## Animal Welfare Problems in Alpacas and Llamas in Europe

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### Abstract

Alpacas and llamas (South American camelids, “SACs”) are becoming more and more popular in Europe for two different reasons. One group of owners is buying these animals as a business investment to sell their fiber and their offspring. Other owners are buying SACs as companion animals with the intension to train them for trekking excursions or other human-animal interactions. Very often both groups of persons become owners of these animals with very little or no experience how to handle and care about agricultural animals. The lack of knowledge about the typical behavior and the needs of alpacas and llamas can lead to excessive stress and anxiety, or even aggression of these animals. The reason for some of these problems are the breeding of “wool-blind animals”, a fixation technique for “easy shearing” of the animals, the use of animals with anatomical problems for human-animal interaction, an incorrect education of young animals (mal-imprinting) and inadequate grouping of intact male animals. In this paper examples of the above-mentioned problems will be presented in detail and methods for avoiding them will be discussed.

**Keywords:** South American camelids, wool-blindness, mal-imprinting, shearing, fighting males

### Introduction

Alpacas and llamas (South American camelids, “SACs”) are becoming more and more popular in Europe. Some owners want to build up a wool-business for European alpaca fiber. Therefore they import alpacas from different countries to breed special animals with fine and dense fiber to sell it to the market. Another group of owners plan to work with alpacas and llamas in human-animal interaction such as promenades or trekking excursions in touristic places, visits in schools, retirement homes, clinics or other institutions. They do this as a business to earn some additional money or as a volunteer in an association. Very often these persons become owners of alpacas and llamas with very little or no experience how to handle and care about agricultural animals. The results are problems which may interfere with the health and the animal welfare of SACs.

### Material and Methods

Information about health and welfare problems with alpacas and llamas had been collected since 2002. Most of these were informations by telephone calls from SAC owners or veterinary colleagues, or by discussions in AELAS working groups and AELAS classes (AELAS is an association organizing seminars on the needs of SACs and SAC Shows). Further information about problems has been acquired via letters, e-mails, or pictures and

movies. In addition, observations were made during alpaca and llama shows and during visits of farms as well as during demonstrations of human-animal interactions.

## Results and Discussion

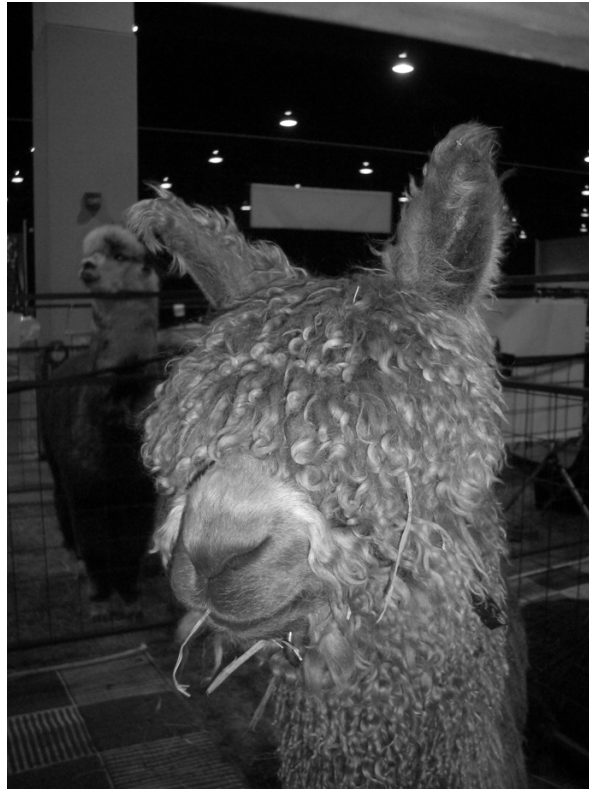
The lack of knowledge, or wrong information, about the needs and the typical behavior and correct anatomy and physiology of alpacas and llamas can lead to excessive stress and anxiety or even aggression, followed by injuries or diseases in these animals. In the following we will present, as examples, four different areas of welfare problems in llamas and alpacas.

### **Welfare problems in animals kept for fiber production:**

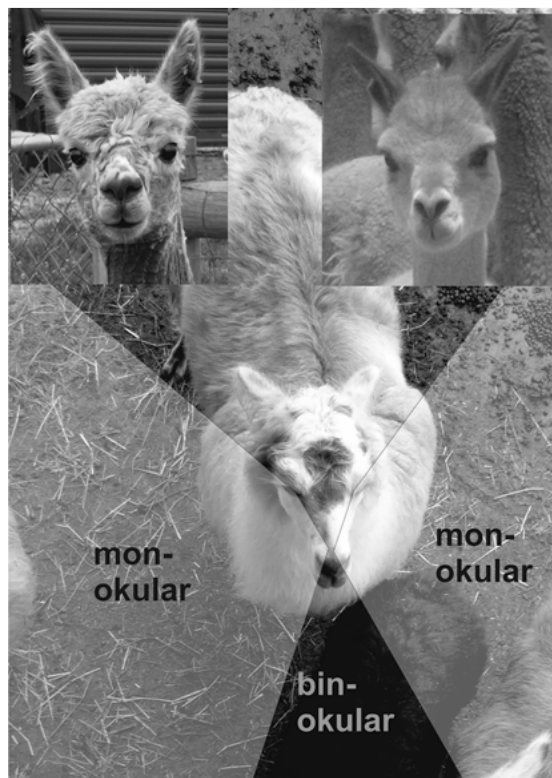
Owners keeping alpacas for fiber production want to breed animals which have a very dense fleece with very fine fiber and good architecture. To produce more fiber the preferred type of alpacas should have this fiber density all over the body, the neck and the head. The latter may lead to a strong reduction of the field of vision, in some cases even to “wool-blindness” (see figs. 1 and 2). SACs are gregarious animals and flight animals. Their eyes are located more lateral and very prominent and enable a large vision area (see Fig. 3). They observe their surrounding very carefully. Blind or partly blind animals are unable to control their surrounding and consequently have permanent stress. Some owners like to breed these “wool-blind” animals because they give the impression of good wool producers. Most of these owners do not know the signs of stress in alpacas. Since the face is totally covered with wool it is also difficult or even impossible to see these signs, which will be explained further below.



*Figure 1: Alpaca huacaya „wool-blind“*



*Figure 2: Alpaca suri „wool-blind“*



*Figure 3: Normal vision of vicunjas (wild variety of the alpacas) shorn alpacas and llamas*  
Wool-blindness can be easily prevented by shortening the fiber around the eyes regularly.

**Welfare problem in alpacas caused by a special fixation technique for shearing:**

All types of alpacas, as well as woolly and suri lammas, do not show a seasonal change of coat. They have to be shorn to avoid overheating in the summer. If SACs are well trained, shearing can be done with the animal in a standing position. Untrained animals will usually not tolerate this technique. For this reason alpacas are usually shorn lying on the floor or on a table in lateral position. One person holds the head, the second person holds the front legs and the third person holds the rear legs. The fixation is done in a natural position and is well tolerated by most alpacas (see Fig. 4).



*Figure 4: Natural position for an alpaca during shearing*



*Figure 5: Unphysiological stretched position for shearing an alpaca (Photo: Allespaka Magazine, 2013).*

Since some years quite a lot of owners prefer a fixation technique which allows the shearing without the help of other persons: The front legs and rear legs are tied with a rope and the animal is overstretched (see fig. 5). This may be a simple method for the owner, but is very stressful and unpleasant for the animal, and sometimes may result in lameness or other injuries.

**Welfare problems in groups of intact males:**

Male intact SACs are territorial. They rarely accept other males (intact or castrated) at the same place and will frequently engage in fighting. The intensity of the fighting depends on the dominance and the subordination of the other males around them.



*Figure 6: Fighting males (photo: R. Guldenschuh)*

Bite injuries are common in these groups and range from small to severe injuries, sometimes with unilateral “biting castration” (see fig. 6). Subordinate males have much stress because the fence does not allow them to escape. It is known that some wild SAC males may live in a group for some time. But in case of problems they can leave the problematic area and avoid further problems, in contrast to our domestic SACs. Groups of early castrated males (with about one year) usually do not have such serious fights. To avoid these problems, intact adult males should live in their own territory. They want to have visual contact to the “competitor”, even from their stables.

**Welfare problems in animals used for human-animal interactions:**

Young alpacas and llamas are very curious and they get in contact with people easily. Close contact to humans at an early stage may lead to mal-imprinting. Mal-imprinted animals are very easy to handle as youngsters. For them, there is no difference between alpacas, llamas and people. The problem is that some owners still think that such animals are ideal for human-animal interactions. Animals with this sort of education, males especially, will usually get very dangerous as adults. Adult mal-imprinted SACs still treat people like their own species: This means that they try to dominate and may start dangerous attacks. There is no treatment or correction of mal-imprinted camelids. The result of such an irresponsible education is that most of them have to be euthanized as adults. This problem, unfortunately, seems to be a never-ending one. Already in 1833 Charles Darwin wrote in his book “The Voyage of the Beagle”: “These animals (guanacos) are very easily domesticated, and I have seen some thus kept in northern Patagonia near a house, though not under any restraint. They are in this state very bold, and readily attack a man by striking him from behind with both knees (feet).”

Alpacas and llamas with correct education, who have learned to get into contact with people and respect them without fear, are very good partners in human-animal interactions. But the owner has to have the knowledge to interact with these animals. For that reason it is necessary to know and be able to interpret the special behavior and language and to know the normal anatomy and physiology of SACs in order to choose the appropriate animals for the job they have to do. Animals with malformations of joints or other health problems, or those who show signs of stress for a longer period, should not be used as “working animals”. Signs of stress are, for example, the “stress mouth” (see fig. 7). Here, the lower lip is pulled down by a fold in the skin. The upper lip follows the lower lip, resulting in an inclined angle for the oral fissure. For comparison, fig. 8 shows a relaxed face with a horizontal direction of the oral fissure.



*Figure 7: Stress mouth in a llama*



*Figure 8: Relaxed face in a llama*

Another sign of stress is the “stress eye” (see fig. 9). Here, the lower eye lid is pulled down, the rose conjunctiva is visible during the time period of stress.



*Figure 9: Stress eye in an alpaca*

## Conclusion

Animal welfare means to give animals a chance to live their life without stress and health problems. As far as we are able to understand their behavior and needs, we should try to find a good balance between a suitable live for them and our interest to utilize their products and their talents. Therefore it is important to observe these animals, learn about their behavior and needs and look always for correct scientific information.

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# Animal Welfare Problems in Alpacas and Llamas in Europe

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6th European Symposium on South American Camelids  
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## Introduction



- Alpacas and llamas (SACs) are becoming more and more popular in Europe
- Imports from Chile, Australia, Canada (mainly alpacas)
- Two different reasons:
  - business investment to sell the fiber and/or the offspring.
  - companion animals or animals for human-animal interactions (promenades, trekking, therapy – business or volunteer work)
- Knowledge about SACs:
  - Information from breeder
  - Internet
  - Books
  - Official approved classes obligatory in CH, and D in case of business enterprise





## Materials and Methods



- Information collected since the year 2002 about health and welfare problems:
  - Owners and veterinary colleagues (telephone calls, emails, letters, pictures and movies)
  - Participants of classes offered by AELAS e.V. and working groups (verbal communication)
  - Shows and farm visits (visual and verbal communication)
  - Demonstrations of human-animal interactions (observational data from therapeutic actions with SACs)



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## Results and Discussion

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- Lack of information or wrong information about the needs  
typical behavior  
correct anatomy  
physiology  
  
of SACs can lead to  
excessive stress  
anxiety  
aggression  
injuries or diseases
- As examples, four different welfare problems in alpacas and llamas are discussed in more detail



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## Animals for Fiber Production



### ● Wool Blindness

Actual breeding goal: “the modern alpaca”

Very dense fiber over body, neck, legs and head.



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## Wool Blindness



- SACs are gregarious animals and flight animals
- eyes are located more laterally and prominently
- enable large vision area
- observe their surroundings very carefully

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## Wool Blindness



- Animals with reduced vision (or “wool blind”) are less capable (or unable) to control their surroundings
- resulting problem: permanent stress
- Solution: Shortening the fiber around the eyes
- (simple action, but unfortunately rarely done)

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## Signs of Stress



- “Stress mouth”: lower lip is pulled down by a fold in the skin. Upper lip follows, resulting in an inclined angle for the oral fissure.



- For comparison, a relaxed face with a horizontal direction of the oral fissure.

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## Signs of Stress



- “Stress eye”:  
the lower eye lid is pulled down,  
the rose conjunctiva is visible during the time period of stress.

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## Welfare Problems: Shearing



- Alpacas and llamas, do not show a seasonal change of coat.



- Shearing necessary to avoid overheating
- Shearing can be done with the animal in standing position.
- Alpacas are usually shorn lying on the floor or on a table in lateral position. Animals held at head, front legs and rear legs.
- This natural positioning is well tolerated by most alpacas

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## Welfare Problems: Fixation Technique



- Frequently applied fixation technique:
- front legs and rear legs tied with a rope
- animal is overstretched
- allows shearing without the help of other persons
- This may be a simple method for the owner, but is very stressful and unpleasant for the animal, and sometimes may result in lameness or other injuries.

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## Welfare Problems: Groups of Intact Males



- Adult intact male SACs are territorial.



- They rarely accept other males (intact or castrated) at the same place
- frequently engaged in fighting
- intensity depends on dominance and subordination other males

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## Welfare Problems: Groups of Intact Males



- Bite injuries range from small to severe injuries, sometimes with unilateral “biting castration”
- Subordinate males have much stress because the fence does not allow them to escape.
- Wild SAC males may live in groups for some time, BUT
- In case of problems they can leave the problematic area to avoid further fights in contrast to our domestic SACs
- Groups of early castrated males (with about one year) usually do not have such serious fights.
- To avoid these problems, intact adult males should live in their own territory. They want to have visual contact to the “competitor”, even from their stables.

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## Welfare Problems: Human-Animal Interaction



- Young alpacas and llamas are very curious and they get in contact with people easily.



- Close contact to humans at an early stage may lead to
- **mal-imprinting**
- Mal-imprinted animals are very easy to handle as youngsters.

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## Welfare Problems: Human-Animal Interaction



- For mal-imprinted there is no difference between alpacas, llamas and people.
- Problem: some owners still think that such animals are ideal for human-animal interactions.
- Animals with such an education, males especially, will usually get very dangerous as adults.
- Adult mal-imprinted SACs still treat people like their own species: they try to dominate and may start dangerous attacks.
- There is no treatment or correction of mal-imprinted camelids. The result of such an irresponsible education is that most of them have to be euthanized as adults.
- This problem, unfortunately, seems to be a never-ending one:

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## Welfare Problems: Human-Animal Interaction



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## Welfare Problems: Human-Animal Interaction



- Alpacas and llamas with correct education have learned as youngsters to get into contact with people and respect them without fear
- They are very good partners in human-animal interactions.
- Therefore the owner has to have the knowledge how to interact with these animals.
- It is necessary to know and to be able to interpret the special behavior and language and to know the normal anatomy and physiology of SACs in order to choose the appropriate animals for the job they have to do.
- Animals with malformations of joints or other health problems, or those who show signs of stress for a longer period, should not be used as “working animals”.

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## Conclusion



- Animal welfare means to give animals a chance to live their life without stress and health problems.
- As far as we are able to understand their behavior and needs, we should try to find a good balance between a suitable live for them and our interest to utilize their products and their talents.
- Therefore it is important to observe these animals, learn about their behavior and needs and look always for correct scientific information.

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## Conclusion



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