

# Beyond Minimal Care Standards for Alpacas

By

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Over the last few days, I've thought long and hard about writing this article. The written language is meant to inform, educate, and entertain a reader. A good writer has the capacity to challenge the way people think. While consuming and digesting food for thought, readers neither expect nor like to be scolded, lectured, and made to feel inadequate. Authors who lace their messages with distinctly angry undertones are perceived to be "negative" and "not taking the high road". Their well intentioned and possibly very helpful advice is ignored or, at the very least, received with resentment. Such feelings rarely lead to meaningful change. I therefore resolve not to allow my anger to overshadow the message.

## *Bad Advice and a Hard Floor*

What prompted me to write? It was advice given to a novice breeder that was repeated to me. The established, "experienced" breeder advised the newcomer to house his alpacas on a concrete floor so he wouldn't have to trim toe nails. No offense, but I'd like to force this individual to rest and sleep on such a floor for several months.

A concrete floor is very hard on an animal's body. It causes arthritis, painful callouses, pressure sores, and general ill thrift. Additionally, a rough and abrasive barn floor surface can lead to harmful bacteria entering tiny cuts in a teat. The end result is often mastitis, exactly one of the reasons dairy farmers bed their cows on cow mattresses.

On the other side, a smooth floor leads to slipping, falling, broken bones, and abortions. The alpacas are often the unfortunate victims of a poorly designed and dangerous farm infrastructure. Of course, sometimes the farmer himself ... well, let's just say that I harbor tantalizing visions of career ending injuries to breeders who force their alpacas to suffer acute discomfort and pain. In this case, I picture the alpacas cheering while their farmer is taken away in an ambulance.

*An Alpaca Celebration*

They're carting off our farmer

Who kept us on cement

His head was cracked wide open

He called out, "I repent!"

Our farmer was too lazy

To take care of our feet

Instead of trimming toe nails

He had us walk on concrete.

We gave him tax deductions

And filled his moneybag

We deserve a little comfort

From this heartless cad.

The herd boss ordered the littlest cria  
To leave a puddle of pee  
We watched the fall, we heard the scream  
What a brilliant strategy!

Our farmer rests in bed now  
There are mats in our barn  
The farmer heals his bed sores  
On a pad of alpaca yarn.

This is all the humor you're going to get out of me on that subject.

### *Lack of Care*

"I'm so happy that alpaca prices are high," one breeder told me several years ago, adding, "because people don't neglect and abuse animals if they have to pay a lot of money for them." This woman was so genuinely earnest and sweet that I swallowed my sarcastic reply. Instead, I gently pointed out to her that people neglect and abuse expensive horses, high-priced, purebred dogs and cats ... they neglect and abuse their own children, for Pete's sake! I am not the only breeder who is increasingly becoming concerned about the lack of proper care many alpacas are forced to live with.

### *A Customized Approach to Alpaca Care Standards*

Minimal care standards for alpacas have already been discussed by other authors. I feel the term is open to interpretation. Climate, terrain, and the size of a farm and/or herd dictate details of infrastructure and care protocols to some extent. An excellent example are the deep barns built by the New Hampshire breeders a friend of mine consulted recently. This particular design protects alpacas in that area of the country during black fly season. A thoughtful approach to raising alpacas! Powerful barn fans should be part of minimal care during New Jersey's hot, humid summers. In a much more arid climate, natural or man made shade may be sufficient to prevent heat stress and discomfort.

### *A Little Elbow Grease*

Raising the comfort level of your alpacas need not be expensive. The barn patios I built on our farm made a very small dent in my farm budget. With an increase in herd size, I noticed that the dirt in front of barn entrances turned into mud after each heavy rain. Alpacas very much dislike walking through mud. If forced to do so for prolonged periods of time, they may develop painful and unsightly thrush between their toes.

After consulting a library book on patio construction, I asked my husband to pick up sand and inexpensive concrete patio pavers. The quality of my alpaca barn patios would probably not pass muster under the trained eye of a professional mason. However, the patios are functional and serve their intended purpose very well. The cost for supplies was minimal and building them required only a few hours of my time. Again, an arid climate or sandy soil may make their construction unnecessary.

### *Organic Pasture Management*

Grazing alpacas are happy and healthy alpacas! The key to smart pasture management are soil samples and soil amendments which specifically address the minerals lacking on a particular pasture. Simply spreading lime each year is not a good management practice. Depending on a soil's mineral content, it may even inhibit pasture growth. Agricultural government agencies and seasoned pasture farmers can be valuable resources for alpaca breeders.

I've been using organic amendments (including composted alpaca manure) on my pastures with spectacular results. Of course, there is no magic bullet if pastures are overstocked and rotational grazing is not utilized.

### *Hay and Minerals*

I offer excellent orchard grass, kelp, and a loose mineral mix specifically formulated for camelids the year around and always free choice. Pelleted supplements are fed very sparingly on our farm. Some alpaca farmers feel that free choice minerals are not necessary if the alpacas consume a daily ration of a pelleted feed. I politely but strongly disagree with that opinion, choosing instead to follow the advice of veterinarian Dr. Dettloff. In *Alternative Treatments for Ruminant Animals*, Paul Dettloff D.V.M. presents a dramatic example of mineral deprivation. Dr. Dettloff stresses that TMR (Total Mixed Rations) are wonderful, but “there are always biological variances in individual animals and in locations that require additional nutrition.”

### *Water*

I add apple cider vinegar to the water consumed by my alpacas. It helps with digestion and is a time honored and proven health practice going back thousands of years to Roman times. I offer water mixed with electrolytes during weather extremes (both very hot and very cold) to encourage the alpacas to drink plenty of fluids. Water buckets should be scrubbed daily for the same reason.

### *Parasite Prevention*

Two very important components of parasite prevention are daily clean-up of dung piles and rotational grazing. Treatments can hardly be effective if the alpacas continually re-infect themselves.

Many alpaca farmers lack a basic knowledge of parasite cycles and treatment protocols. Exchanging information with other breeders and reading posts on the Internet is not enough and can be dangerous! There is just too much to learn. Primary sources of knowledge should be consultation with a veterinarian in addition to textbooks written by professionals. Attending a seminar is also helpful but is rarely sufficient for a good grasp of the complex subject of parasites in livestock. There is no parasite prevention or treatment program that applies to all farms. Only a thorough study of the issues will help breeders to identify and address the specific needs of their individual herds.

### *Fly and Mosquito Control*

In most areas of the United States, fly control is an issue on any livestock farm. To do nothing can create health problems. It is also cruel, since the alpacas can neither rest nor graze

comfortably with swarms of flies buzzing around them. Control must be aggressive without jeopardizing the health of alpacas and human care takers. Natural fly parasites and organic bait are available to those of us who do not wish to use potentially harmful chemicals. Purple Martins provide excellent mosquito control where a farm's environment is conducive to attracting these beneficial birds.

### *Rodent Control*

A farm without rodent control is soon overrun with exploding populations of mice and rats. While the occasional field mouse scurrying around the barn should not cause hysteria, it's wise to have a control program in place. Rodents often carry leptospirosis. Owners of infested farms should not be surprised if their herd's abortion rate takes on epidemic proportions.

A barn cat is a natural answer to rodent control but carries the risk of toxoplasmosis. Poisonous rodent bait is very effective but poses a danger if alpacas gain access to it. Mouse or rat traps are another option. There is no perfect solution to the rodent problem.

### *Shearing*

Alpacas must be shorn annually and farmers should not wait until the animals suffer from severe heat stress. Shearing schedules can be problematic, but lack of timely shearing is often due to poor planning. Preparations for shearing should start many months prior to the actual shearing dates by scheduling a shearer or sending blades to be sharpened. If planning fails or poor planning results in the alarming absence of a shearer and helpers, good quality hand shears or

even scissors can be used to rescue alpacas from heat stress. I simply can't imagine leaving unshorn alpacas to swelter in high summer temperatures.

Why is livestock neglected? Why must alpacas suffer when their needs are so easily met? I've identified three main causes.

### *Lack of Customer Support*

In my opinion, it is a seller's moral obligation to educate customers in all aspects of alpaca care. There ought to be a "Hall of Shame" for breeders who sell alpacas to novice owners and fail to teach the most minimal husbandry practices. The good news is that neglect on such farms is due to ignorance, and conditions can easily be rectified. Once educated, these owners are incredibly eager to make improvements and are happy to see their animals enjoy better living conditions.

Of course, not all new owners follow the advice given to them by their mentor. Some don't follow through on the promises they made when they purchased the animals. It's heartbreaking when that happens. It can, unfortunately, also lead to legal entanglements. Sellers who give reproductive guarantees are wise to clarify in their contracts what will happen if buyers refuse to follow mutually agreed upon care instructions.

### *The Lazy Farmers*

Lazy farmers exist, but their farming tenure is usually short lived. Physically lazy alpaca farmers with a skilled and motivated staff are the exception to this rule. The most important pre-requisite for a physically lazy alpaca farmer's success is a large herd and enough sales to justify the staff.

The alpacas owned by an armchair farmer are well treated if the employees are caring individuals. A physically lazy alpaca farmer with a small herd and no support staff often neglects the animals. This farmer will find it impossible to generate profits except for the occasional surprise bonanza. High veterinary bills and losses due to death and reproductive failure will see to that. Neglected livestock often becomes dead stock. I'm not sure that there is a "cure" for physical laziness.

### *The Arrogant Farmers*

Farmers in this category are often industrious but feel that animals are not worthy of special efforts. "They're only animals" more than one person has told me. The comment implies that people are entitled to physical comfort, but animals should "tough it out" under less than desirable conditions. Spending time and money on the herd's comfort is far from a priority for such breeders.

### *Higher Comfort – Higher Profits*

What may motivate the lazy and the arrogant to change their infrastructure and care protocols is a convincing argument that better care translates into higher profits. Again, dairy farmers serve as great examples. Most are pragmatic. You are not likely to read, "I love my dairy cows and want them to be comfortable." What you will read is something like this, "Since we installed cow mattresses in our barn, profits have gone up considerably. Our cows give more milk, the somatic cell count is down, and we treat very few cases of mastitis." The dairy farmer who spoke at an Organic Farming conference I attended did not exclaim, "I love my cows dearly and

want them to be happy.” Instead, he positively cackled with glee when he discussed the positive impact of rotational grazing and organic practices on his profits and lifestyle.

Contrast this to the alpaca farmer who told me, “You’re a woman, I’m a man. I’m not into all this mushy stuff. This is an investment.” Such lack of logical thinking always astonishes me. When will *all* livestock producers understand that outstanding care translates into higher profits? A healthy animal is a productive animal.

### *Losing Sales*

Lazy and uncaring alpaca farmers don’t seem to have a clue that they lose numerous sales. Buyers are turned off by less than desirable conditions on a farm. I know this because many buyers share their outrage and disgust over what they observed. They also volunteer complimentary information about farms where animal welfare is an obvious priority. Breeders belonging to the first group often bemoan their “constant bad luck”. It’s always someone else’s or the alpacas’ fault, never their own failure to work hard and meet the needs of the animals. Many alpacas are capable of living and even reproducing under horrendous conditions, but usually not for long.

### *Should We Rescue?*

Rescuing neglected alpacas is admirable if there is reasonable assurance that the neglectful or abusive producer will never own or breed alpacas again. If that isn’t the case, the well meaning buyer of a “rescued” alpaca simply encourages the guilty party to breed more alpacas under the

same bad conditions. The good Samaritan becomes an “enabler” and guilty of aiding and abetting the neglectful producer.

### *Animal Welfare Leaders*

As alpaca farmers, we are justifiably proud of our industry’s terrific marketing programs, our outstanding registry services, and the enormous accomplishments of the Alpaca Research Foundation. We like to think of ourselves as innovative leaders in the world of camelid production. Please, let’s be leaders in the area of animal welfare as well. While alpacas needlessly suffer from neglect and possibly abuse, we have not done right by our “speechless brothers”.

No alpaca should have to live without adequate and comfortable shelter, good nutrition, and timely shearing. No alpaca should have to walk around with nails that resemble bird claws. No alpaca should suffer relentless attacks from swarms of flies and other parasites. No alpaca female should have to give birth while close to expiring from heat exhaustion. No alpaca cria should be weaned forcefully before it is ready just to make a sale.

### *The Humane Society*

The general public is increasingly critical of how livestock is maintained and treated on this country’s farms. Producers of pork and poultry products learned the hard way how irate customers can impact their way of farming.

According to *Lancaster Farming* (Vol 54, No. 3), the *Humane Society of the United States* has “targeted Ohio for its next comprehensive actions on a range of issues from livestock confinement to puppy mills.” The Society’s survey showed Ohio “ripe for the taking, with 67 percent public ballot support for a ballot initiative in November 2010”. Additional states have already been selected for scrutiny.

### *Animal Rights Groups*

Make no mistake, we either monitor animal welfare within the wider alpaca community ourselves, or the Animal Rights groups will eventually do it for us. They are powerful, well funded, and they’re not going away. Some of their demands have been reasonable and based on realistic farming practices, some have not. Funding is donated by individuals who often don’t know which end of a chicken expels the egg. Members of one group oppose raising, breeding, and maintaining any domesticated animal. At AKC dog shows, their members have opened traveling crates while owners were in the show ring. Dogs ran off the show grounds, and some were killed in traffic or never seen again.

The general public does not support this kind of behavior. People want to see farms in their communities. They enjoy visiting a farm with their children or grandchildren, especially if that farm has animals.

These same people, however, do not want to see alpacas standing in mud up to their hocks, “bedded” on concrete, and covered with flies.

### *Public Relations*

“It’s nobody’s business but my own how I keep my alpacas,” one breeder told me. That may be so, but believe me, it’s in our best interest to demonstrate that alpaca fiber is produced while the animals live in comfort. We actually have a golden public relations opportunity on this issue. North American alpaca fiber and alpaca products should become synonymous with high animal welfare standards in the public eye.

### *My Brother’s Keeper*

Our own farm has been called Alpaca Paradise by more than one visitor. I enjoy caring for our alpacas, but I am also in business to make a profit and have done so. The two concepts – paradise and a positive bank balance – mesh rather nicely. Why is that so hard for some livestock producers to understand?

I recognize that I have not been entirely successful in hiding my anger over the deplorable conditions some alpacas have to endure. Even my poem wasn’t written with the milk of human kindness. Luckily, there is a woman whose poetry has great beauty and eloquence. She pleads without rancor but with convincing passion.

I am the voice of the voiceless

Through me the dumb shall speak

Till the deaf world’s ear be made to hear

The wrongs of the wordless weak

And I am my brother's keeper

And I will fight his fight:

And I speak the word for beast and bird

Till the world shall set things right.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850 – 1919)