

## The Real 'Magic' in Alpaca

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When I first discovered alpacas I didn't start out wanting to breed the best fibre in the world, like the majority of alpaca breeders my imagination and my heart were firstly captured by these totally beguiling animals.

We all know there is something about alpacas that appeals to us on a deeper level than most other livestock. At times the alpaca seems surreal, almost like an incarnation of something mythological. Maybe it could be attributed to the romance of their coming from a strange and distant country, whose past echoes with the memory of the ancient Inca and their passion for the alpaca, or is it their absence from the everyday animals of our childhoods, that sets them apart?

We admire their stoic approach to illness and enjoy their ridiculous posturing at meal times. It is their unwavering ability to work together in times of danger, the pouting lips when things don't go their way, or the mad dash around the paddock looking for a baby that has slipped out of sight, that personifies them in our minds.

It is these qualities that we can't quantify that appear to be the essence or 'magic' of alpaca. But I believe that their true magic is in plain sight, easily accessible & totally able to be quantified, it is their wonderful fleece.

So if for a moment, we set aside our emotional connections for owning alpacas and take a logical stance, it is fair to say that the mystique of the alpaca has somehow managed to sustain our industry thus far. However, we cannot continue to solely depend on the alpacas appeal to supply an ever decreasing market for wether 'lawn mowers', or to continue to expect high prices for show winning animals, whose abilities to meet the market demand for truly fine fibre is at times questionable.

Recent declines in prices obtained for alpacas, especially those with less desirable fleece qualities, have set alarm bells ringing amongst many breeders. Many of whom are now seriously looking to the commercial future of alpaca fibre to carry our industry forward, to produce commercially viable fibre in quantities able to provide a real income for the producer.

We have at our disposal, objective scientific methods for truly measuring the 'magic' in alpaca fibre. It is important to set aside our preferences and prejudices for certain alpaca and traits, and to logically assess their qualities based on measurable and desirable market driven standards.

Qualities that the market determines as being those that will achieve the highest return.

It is within our grasp to breed an alpaca designed to not only meet but exceed the expectations of the global fibre market.

Alpaca farmers of the future will be seeking alpacas that can sustain an ultrafine to superfine fleece which can give them a profitable return for a decade, not just a year or two. It is those alpacas exhibiting an ability to maintain a very fine even fleece well into maturity, that isn't too long or too short, and has defined structure, that will be in demand.

By utilising our knowledge of genetics & by taking advantage of the simple and inexpensive methods available to us to accurately measure our progress; we can make huge advancements in refining our alpacas to become market driven producers of highly desirable, financially rewarding ultrafine fibre.

It is a rewarding experience, when totally factual, modern and objective measurement, is the catalyst to ignite an immeasurable passion for this ancient 'fibre of the gods'. I hope you find the spark to ignite your desire to commit to taking up the essential challenge of meeting the markets demand.

The future for alpaca fibre can be more 'magical' than we ever dreamed possible!

*Julie McClen is a partner in Oak Grove Alpacas, who are cofounders of the Alpaca Ultimate Group that ran the 'National Alpaca Fibre Seminars' in 2006/07 & created the record breaking 'Ultrafine Bale Scheme,' which enabled Australian alpaca breeders to achieve \$60- a kilo for their ultrafine fibre.*