

## **If It's Lifestyle You Want ...**

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**Researching a book on the history of alpacas in Australia has shown up some common threads in the motivation for those joining the industry. For many, it was that almost indefinable “lifestyle” that tipped the scales towards involvement and investment.**

But what is lifestyle? For the average city dweller, country life can appear idyllic: quiet roads, actually being able to see the stars at night, crisp mornings and sleep-ins whenever the mood takes you.

And who decides that this is better than the alternative? Not surprisingly, it is the female partner who tends to have the final (after often also having the first) say, and the still high proportion of female participants in the industry evidences this generally.

In most cases, alpacas are a second (often running in parallel with the first) career. And another common denominator is that a first career has generally been successful. Alpaca industry participants are generally in a higher income group and have well-developed skills in some business, even if unrelated to the land. For example, alpaca industry participants are far more IT-literate than the general population, have a better-developed awareness of taxation law than most, and even care more about the environment than the rest of the community.

The outstanding work of Bonnie Vale Alpacas' John Lawrie in researching and documenting the environmental friendliness of alpacas has been one of the most often-quoted sources of information in response to my inevitable “what got you into alpacas?” opening gambit. So many people are able to relate the 39 kPa impact of alpacas on the paddock, as compared to a sheep's 82 kPa or cattle's 185. And the ability of alpacas to more efficiently graze poorer quality pasture is another regular quote.

I sometimes wonder if it's a chicken and egg situation. Were these people as well-informed and enthusiastic when they started out, or has there been a conversion? Probably both, but anecdotally at least it appears there was a latent interest in the environment as the initial decisions were being made. I met one hard-nosed Melbourne businessman who has invested many hundreds of thousands of dollars into alpacas over the past three years and, midway into a conversation centred on cash-flows, rates of return and financing strategies, suddenly spoke eloquently and passionately about the merits of permaculture.

When the morning dew on a lush paddock becomes a wet and windy winter storm, and the camaraderie and joy of the show ring is preceded by a three-hour drive starting before the sun rises, the real meaning of “lifestyle” becomes apparent. Delivering a cria is a fulfilling, if sometimes messy, experience. Having to bury a farm friend is not.

There have been casualties along the way. Many have decided that it's all too hard, that the chasm between dream and reality is too great. But even more have stuck with it. Alpacas have spawned a new, if mature, generation of farmers, not all of them full-time but all enriched by the experience. What often started out as simply being overwhelmed by the beautiful alpaca eyelashes has become a life-changing experience for many.

And my favourite quotation, without a doubt, is: “Alpacas have meant that I can be me. I'm no longer just someone else's wife or so and so's mother; and now I'm accepted for myself.”