

Open Response to PETA Claim: Alpaca Wool Abuse

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The Truth about Treatment of Alpacas in North America

Lincoln, NE — A recent investigation by PETA against shearers at Mallkini, an alpaca farm near Muñani, Peru has been brought to our attention. Members of the Alpaca Owners Association, Inc. as well as North American based shearers and veterinarians were shocked and appalled at the harsh treatment portrayed in the video.

While there are good and bad practices in every industry, the investigation uses the most egregious video of alpacas being shorn poorly and inhumanely. Kind and compassionate alpaca owners and shearers throughout the world far outweigh practices like the one shown.

“We cannot speak for the standards of other groups, but in the United States we have support and resources on the proper handling of alpacas readily available,” said Wendy Dittbrenner, board member of the Alpaca Owners Association, Inc. (AOA).

Just as mammograms, colonoscopies and having blood drawn are not pleasant experiences and in a snapshot, can appear torturous, they are indeed briefly uncomfortable but are important steps we take to better preserve our health. Shearing is the same. It is typically done in a gentle, caring, and non-fearful manner for the animal. It is also imperative to their survival.

“A full fleeced alpaca during summer months will suffer from heat stress. Heat stress (hyperthermia) can be a life-threatening medical condition,” said Michelle Ing, DVM. “Sadly, an unshorn alpaca can die from this condition. When prolonged hyperthermia occurs without intervention, organ failure ensues and death is inevitable.

“As a veterinarian, I have specialized in the care and wellbeing of alpacas for 22 years. I have witnessed the humane shearing of thousands of alpacas during my career and I personally shear my own herd. Because of their fiber characteristics, alpacas in North America are prone to hyperthermia and failure to shear after a year’s growth is inhumane. I have treated alpacas for heat stress and the first line of treatment is shearing!”

As domesticated animals, it is up to us to ensure the survival of alpacas through proper, constant care.

“Alpacas do not live in the wild,” said D. Andrew Merriwether, Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology and Biology and Chair of Anthropology at Binghamton University. “They were created by Native Andeans 6–8,000 years ago. Like some breeds of sheep, alpacas don’t shed. They will continue to gain fleece until they die.”

There are two main methods of properly shearing alpacas. They can be shorn in the standing position, which is best done for alpacas that do not resist being restrained. If they do resist, there is a risk of injury. The more common method of shearing an alpaca is to lay them on their side and restrain them by their legs to prevent any harm coming to the alpacas and the handlers. The alpaca's head should be positioned so that it is properly supported.

"I have owned alpacas for 20 years," said Dittbrenner. "I have not had one of my animals cut or injured by shearing because they are properly handled. The alpacas are simply restrained for approximately 8 minutes in a comfortable and safe manner. Here, we have a human 'ambassador' at their side the entire time to walk each alpaca into the shearing barn, and help during the process of shearing, then walk them out 8 minutes later. I have welcomed people to watch the shearing process at my farm. Those who have come for the first time have always left our shearing expressing appreciation for the attention to care and safety of my animals. We use professionals who care about alpacas. This is how it is done in the U.S."

Jason Siffring, owner of High Plains Shearing has been shearing alpacas professionally on his own in North America for more than 6 years.

"The investigation focused on a shearing practice that is not here in North America," said Siffring. "Most alpaca owners in the United States see their animals as part of the family. They don't want to hurt them and neither do I. We are very gentle and know how to handle even the feistiest alpacas. We go slow and take their fleece off nice and easy. It's all about the animal and preserving the product. We carefully follow the lines of the animal to avoid injury and after shearing is done, everyone is happy. The owners have a nice fiber and the alpacas have a nice haircut and are cool and safe for the summer."

Like a child experiencing their first haircut, being made to sit still with new people, sounds and sensations surrounding them might cry out, so do some alpacas. Because alpacas are typically quiet animals their alert sound can be surprising to those who have never heard it.

"We communicate specific needs and concerns about alpacas to our shearers," said Dittbrenner. "My shearer, Joshua Klein will stop everything to help an older alpaca, or pregnant alpaca have a soft and comfortable shearing experience. Last year I told him I had a young alpaca that was blind and he stated we would shear her last with less commotion and noise around her. As I stood and watched, I felt so proud of how much we did to help one little alpaca feel safe and comfortable."

While they are restrained, many alpaca owners take the opportunity to have their animals' nails and teeth trimmed as well as vaccinations administered. These are all important to the overall health of alpacas.

It is important to have advocates bring attention to those who do not put the care and wellbeing of their animals first. It is, however, equally important not to assume that all business practices are the same. The Alpaca Owners Association and its members are eager to show that what the investigation of one business found is not how we do it. We do not condone this type of treatment and are here to help educate how shearing and overall alpaca care should be done.

As states re-open, take the time to contact a local alpaca farm and schedule a visit to see firsthand how loved and cared for these animals are. You will likely find that many in the North American industry began their business with alpacas because of their deep love and respect of animals.

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Please see the following links for video examples of shearing in North America

North Plains Alpacas:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=531923084141617>

Peaceful Prairie Ranch:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=613249919288359>