

# Suri Worry

By Daniel Powell

Published in Llama Life II Spring 2003

The questionable behavior that surrounds Magnifire aside, I am unclear as to what exactly is all the hoopla with these crossbred llamas – huarizo I think we like to call them. Oh I know the bit about how huarizo are selected against in their countries of origin based on their reduced utilitarian and economic traits, but why here in the states do we give a rat's ass? To my mind nearly all our pastures are filled with mixed-breed animals. Who out there has purebred llamas? By this I mean animals that have proven to be free of all vicuña genetic markers and that are similar enough to be logically grouped together and which when bred within their own group produce like offspring. Our definition of 'llama' is based on a very loosely defined phenotype. If we expand our list of alpaca traits to include suri fiber – lumping suri fiber character with the likes of lance shaped ears and low tail set - than yes suri fibered llamas do in fact have alpaca traits. Likewise, if we expand the definition to include extensive wool coverage or height restrictions than minis and argentine types do as well.

Rarely do I meet breeders with a singular, focused breeding standard to which they adhere. Most seem to breed llamas as if they were making a cake; a bit of this a bit of that, toss it in the oven for 345 days and hope this one turns out - drawn to llama breeding like a gambler to a slot machine. Granted, there are emerging breeders of animals of such consistent type that their animals may well be the forerunners of pure breeds themselves – *providing the breeders of these distinctive animals don't shift their breeding goals to reflect the next market forecast. Argentines are the first to come to mind as they are among my favorites* with their consistent huacaya-like fleeces and sturdy build. Though still not a pure breed, when I see one I at least I know what it is and what produced it – it belongs to an entire group of similar animals. Hurray for that. Secondly, Pack llamas come to mind with their distinct fleece, elegance, and athleticism. They have become quite striking against a sea of woolies. My hat is off to all those dedicated breeders. Minis and Suris may have a much longer road ahead of them, but I am confident that they will succeed in their efforts - for they have at least set their sights, named their goals, and have begun to work towards them. Now the rest of us need to define what it is we are breeding for...and NAME IT.

Why have so many breeders failed to define a type while importers seem to discover and introduce a new one yearly? Evolutionarily speaking, importers have been using that mammalian brain of theirs to market to us slower moving, unassuming dinosaurs (aka breeders). They figured out the 'NAME IT' thing long ago. Call it an Argentine, call it a Suri, call it a Chilean, or call it a Peruvian but whatever you do don't call it a huarizo.

Their groupings haven't always been the most logical or uniform, but we breeders are always quick to eat it up. Naming our goals is the first step in achieving them. So why is it so many still cling with religious fervor to maintaining our national herd as a conglomerate of mongrels? It is akin to blasphemy to choose a path other than that one path chosen by the zealots of our industry. I can hear them now plotting our course, making-up rules; rules to redefine huarizo traits to include suri fiber, about the registry, about screening imports, and even about putting a stop to suri llama importations altogether. And what good will come from more rules, more limitations? Are we to assume all suris guilty until proven innocent? And what about Argentines and their rumored vicuña or huacaya ancestry? How much of a threat do they pose? Let the witch hunt begin! Yeeh haw! Those silkies and woolies look pretty flammable – should make for quite a blaze if they survive their trial by drowning.

On its surface the unethical behavior that surrounds Magnifire seems to beg all sorts of changes of the industry: outlaw all crosses, DNA blood type all suri llamas, create a sub registry, don't create a sub registry, and on and on. Clearly a witch hunt has begun. All this talk about protecting our gene pool is rubbish. What the zealots of North American lamadom are actually saying is "We were here first" and "Lets put gum in the new girl's hair." Llamas and alpacas have too much common ancestry to be considered separate species so why all the fuss? Most well documented genetic and anatomical studies suggest that llamas predominantly descended from guanacos, and alpacas most likely descended from crosses of early llamas with wild vicuña as they came to share their range. Subsequent crosses of the four South American camelids and selection for various traits no doubt resulted in a plethora ancient domestic lama breeds ranging from small suri alpaca type llamas to gigantic meat llamas. Enter the Spanish Conquistadors and their hungry armies and in no time they had eaten a huge hole right in the middle of the lama genome. In so doing they left a gulf between llamas and alpacas that we North American breeders still pay homage to with our breeding practices today.

If we all cared about the future success of our industry as well as our favorite 'llama type' as much as we do about today's market, we'd be making very different breeding decisions. If we were truly worried about preservation we'd all be breeding fewer low-end females and utilizing more of our male population. The over use of big name studs is potentially as detrimental to the diversity of our gene pool as is the occasional well documented, judicious alpaca cross - but who out there is waving that banner? If we cared about preservation we'd already be grouping our llamas in sub-registries of some sort so that each distinct character could be preserved and selected for. For example: In an Argentine sub-registry with dedicated breeders working towards the development of a uniform type, suri fleeced 'surprises' like Magnifire would be selected against – certainly not commanding higher stud fees. So too would suri fiber be selected against in a Classic Pack Llama sub-registry, a North American Silky sub-registry, and so on. Of course human nature being what it is, offspring from a huarizo like Magnifire might somehow still find their way into a suri-llama sub-registry. Likewise, offspring from a

huarizo like Cometego might one day find their way into an Argentine sub-registry. However, in either case the wildfire would be contained within the immediate gene pool of the animals within the specified sub-registry. Proper subsequent selection thereafter would work towards correcting any potential adverse affects. In short, a sub-registry is a valuable tool - even a fire wall of sorts - to the ethical breeder who hitherto had no defense against the unscrupulous behavior of a few.

Llamas did not drop fully formed from stars. They are the result of hybridization, inbreeding, artificial selection, natural selection, and on and on. They were bred for ceremonial sacrifice, meat, fiber, and to be a beast of burden among other things. Like all domestics they have a checkered past that mirrors our own. Let's not forget that as early captive wild animals they no doubt endured unspeakable abuse and stress at our hand. Those that survived that initial first step towards domestication became the forbearers of today's beloved pets and companions. What we now have is an animal that is much more resilient than we give credit - in body, mind, and genome. Suri llamas, as well as Argentine llamas and Pack llamas, are a blend of all the most successful traits of the South American llamas of old. Some llama types may well be rooted in ancient pastures, others may have yet to be born, but each type only adds to the distinctiveness of the others. Those breeders suggesting that the likes of Magnifire is reason enough for the industry to swallow their diatribe hook line and sinker and rally behind their self-promoting opinions should instead be putting their energy into nailing down their own breeding goals. They should be joining with like-minded breeders and proposing sub-registries and clubs of their own to preserve their 'type llama.' This approach will of course require greater skill and dedication of them. It may well separate the breeder from the collector - the seed from the chaff as it were. But, the llama industry's future depends on a full team of players - the Mini llama, the Suri llama, the Argentine llama, the Pack llama, and on and on - each one an expert of the position it plays and each with its very own cheering section. To deny the llama industry this vital growth spurt; however painful, however difficult, will serve only to pinion it.