

Reimagining Alpacas

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By

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled:

Reimagining Alpacas

Presented by Robert I. Long

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my father, Dennis Damon Long.

You filled me with the spirit of adventure since I was a small child. You taught me everything I needed to know to become a man. Your love of nature and joy of farming lives on in me. I find good reason to thank you every day, and every day you are sorely missed.

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ABSTRACT

Newly “discovered” to industrialized societies, alpacas have gained popularity as both livestock and pet in the United States over the last quarter century. This American micro-culture is a nexus of many traditional and post-modern activities; hobby farming, eco-ranching, fiber artistry, show animal competitions, organic textile manufacturing, and participating in a specialized knowledge community. This study explores the relationship between the alpaca lifestyle, breeding enthusiasts, and the fiber industry.

Examining a population of Midwest alpaca producers, a qualitative examination of producer motivations as exhibited on alpaca-oriented websites and how these vary across the urban – rural continuum is presented. As a case study of post-modern farming in America, an ongoing reimagination that is guiding this micro-culture and the fiber industry are considered. This thesis is presented by an industry participant and advocate of an alpaca fiber industry. The study is intended to add to the discussion about post-modern agricultural practices in the United States and to literature concerning the animal – human relationship. It concludes that the alpaca industry is trending towards fiber production. Study results indicate that producers of all sorts share common objectives, even if approaching them from differing viewpoints. Lifestyle farmers, breeding enthusiasts and fiber producers will have their roles to play as the alpaca fiber industry develops.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The cultural construction of Alpacas has varied over the ages from a “gift from the Gods” to a scourge to be slaughtered. Until recently thought of an obscure mountain dwelling beast, the alpaca has been imagined as an alternative to traditional livestock in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Germany and elsewhere (Figure 1.2). This new construction of alpacas has manifested as a cultural phenomenon that transcends several aspects of American life. Alpacas now exist in the United States as both livestock and pet, both exotic and standard. Raising alpacas is both a business and a lifestyle. This activity and the community of people involved constitute a fascinating American cultural and agricultural phenomenon worthy of geographical examination.

Using self-descriptive narratives of Midwestern alpaca producers on prominent alpaca sales websites, I examine depictions of the alpaca industry and the idealized rural lifestyle associated with the alpaca phenomenon. I also explore how these self-representations can vary across the urban – rural continuum. The findings shed insight into several larger questions:

- 1) How have alpacas been conceptualized as the focus of an American micro-culture?
- 2) What is the relationship between lifestyle farmers, alpaca breeding enthusiasts, and fiber industry advocates?

3) What ongoing reimaginings of alpacas are guiding the alpaca community and industry?

In answering these questions, I hope to contribute to discussion about post-modern agriculture and lifestyle farming in America. As an admitted advocate of a future alpaca fiber industry who has been a longtime industry participant, I hope to use personal insights to illuminate some aspects of the alpaca industry and its community that are not apparent to “outsiders.”

What is an Alpaca?

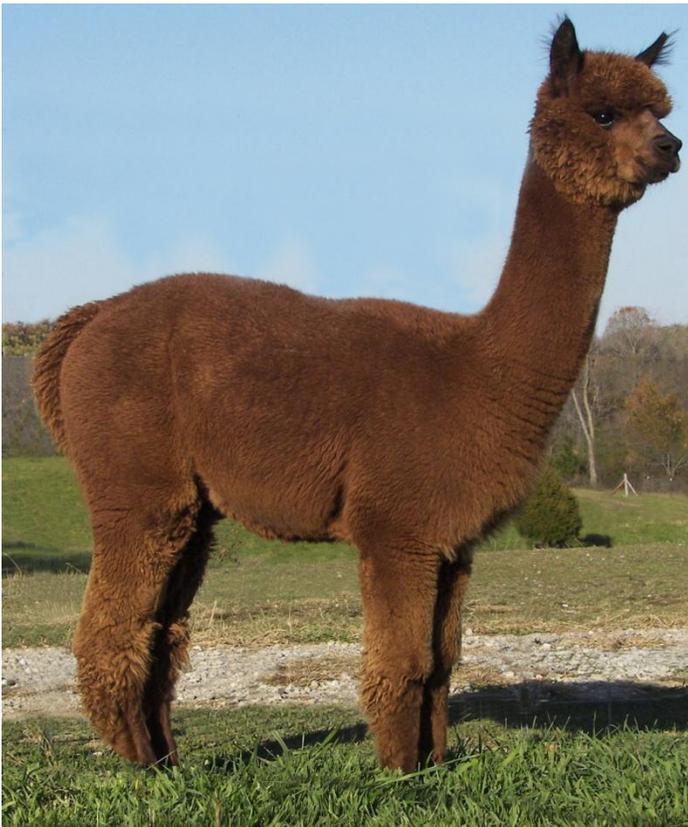
Paco vicunas, the modern Alpaca, is a four legged simple ruminant with padded feet and two toenails to each foot (Figure 1.1); characteristics which define the Camelid family of animals. The original Camelid evolved in North America, then disseminated to Asia, Europe, Africa and South America. Although the progenitor reached extinction over 20 million years ago, the process of speciation has resulted in a half dozen modern species. The six species of the modern Family *Camelidae* are found in a surprisingly wide variety of climatic habitats.

The Dromedary Camel found in Africa, the Near East and South Asia is considered to be the only large mammal capable of traversing severe desert terrain. The Bactrian Camel found in Central Asia faces the bitter cold conditions of the Gobi Desert. Of the four New World species, two are domesticated. Llama are thought to be primarily bred from the wild Guanaco, while the Alpaca is considered to have been domesticated from wild Vicuna (Reebs 2002). The

historical distribution of all four species of New World Camelid has been strongly correlated to the Andean Mountain Chain of Western South America. They presently exist in significant quantities in the South American countries of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina (Figure 1.3). Alpaca that exist in the rest of the world were primarily exported from Chile, Bolivia and Peru (Hoffman 2008).

All modern Camels grow a dense woolen fleece. In the case of alpacas, this coat of natural fiber can grow six inches or more annually. Alpaca fleece has long been prized for making luxurious and functional textiles.

Figure 1.2: Photograph of a huacaya alpaca

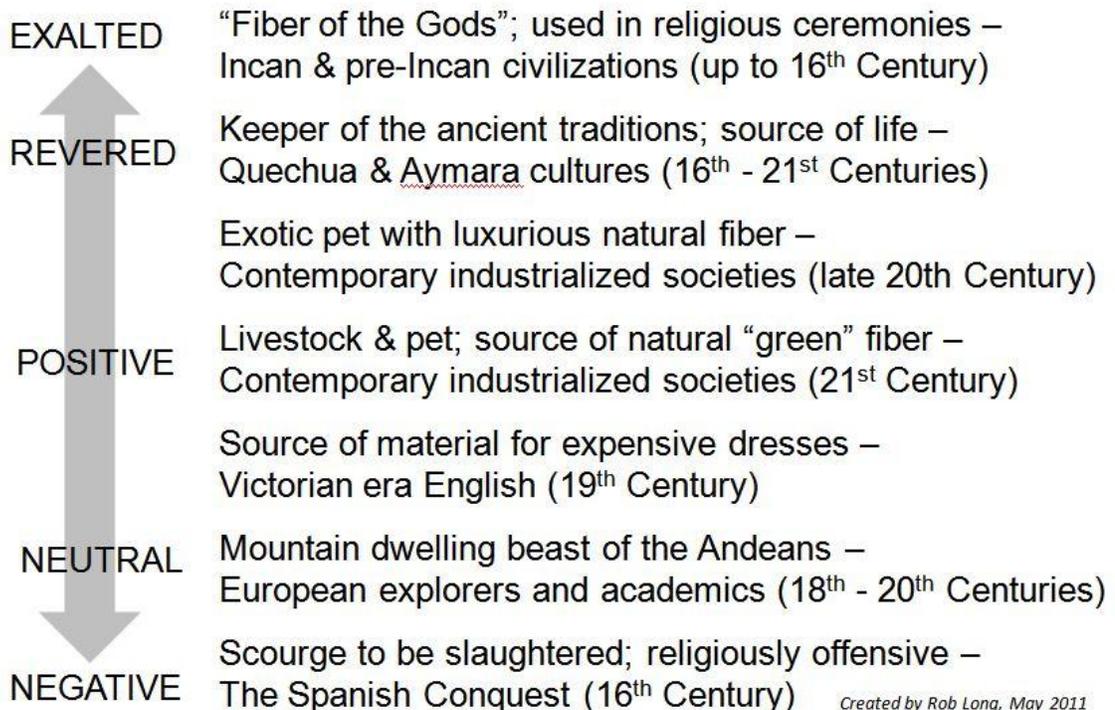


(Picture taken by Rob Long, 2008)

Historical Imaginations of the Alpaca

Perceptions of animals, both wild and domestic, are determined by human culture (Yarwood & Evans 2000; Serpell 1996). Conceptualizations of an animal species may vary widely from one society to the next. This tendency has both benefited and brought harm to the alpaca. In particular, religious beliefs have both exalted and condemned the alpaca (Figure 1.2). Furthermore, the conceptualization of an animal within a society may change overtime, what I refer to as reimagining. The history of alpacas is ripe with divergent conceptualizations and is presently going through a reimagination in the United States.

Figure 1.2: Selected cultural conceptualization of alpacas in the past millennia



Domestication and the Incan Empire

The native populations of the Andes are credited with the domestication of llamas and alpacas approximately 7000 years ago. New World Camelids are thought to be the only large animal species converted to domestic use by native populations in all of the Americas (Diamond 1999). Either by design or innovation, llamas became the beasts of burden in Andean society while Alpacas were raised for resources, primarily fiber. Alpaca fiber has been long valued for its use in textile production among the people of the Andes.

In the religious belief system of the Incans in particular, alpacas were considered to bear “the fleece of the Gods.” The importance of alpacas to pre-Hispanic Andean cultures was such that burial rituals incorporated the use of alpaca body parts. This included ritual sacrifice and mummification of alpacas. Many beliefs and practices persist to this day among the Quechua and Aymara peoples, who revere alpacas and use them as an essential supply of fleece, hides, meat, bones and fertilizer (Kuznar 2003).

The Incans are known to have maintained a vast trading network within and extending from their Empire. Anthropological evidence of alpacas being used for rituals exists throughout the former lands of the Empire. Their mummified corpses and body parts are found even in deserts and lowland areas in which contemporary alpacas are not present. Ancient mummified alpacas from Incan and pre-Incan civilizations also exhibit even better characteristics

desirable for textiles than modern alpacas, confirming their role as luxurious fiber producers for many millennia (Hoffman 2003).

The Age of Conquest

The downfall of the Incan Empire at the hands of Spanish Conquistadores was accompanied by a large scale slaughter of alpacas and llamas. Spaniards witnessed local inhabitants performing husbandry and religious rituals involving alpacas that offended their Catholic beliefs. Alpacas were labeled a scourge and Spanish invaders laid waste to the alpaca population of South America.

Although cloaked in religious justification, it is thought that the destruction of alpacas played a role in subjugating the local inhabitants. Alpacas may also have been viewed as occupying pastures valuable for grazing Spanish cattle and Merino sheep (Gade 1999).

The resulting population decline is known to be the largest evolutionary bottleneck event in the modern history of the alpaca. This significantly reduced the alpaca population at the time. Numerous remote populations remained in hinterlands not subject to Spanish control. The range of alpacas and llamas was significantly diminished (Figure 1.3).

“Rediscovery” of the Alpaca

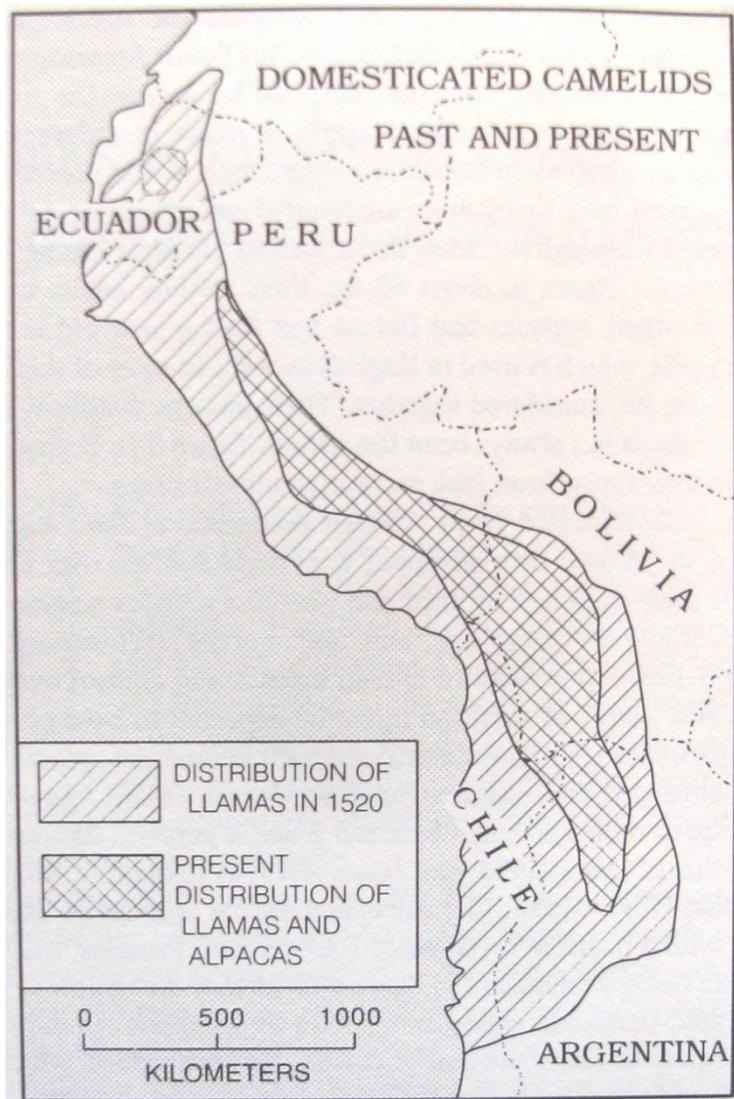
Exploration of the New World during the Victorian Era and through the Era of Industrialization affected western imaginings of the alpaca. In 1834, English businessman Sir Titus Salt “rediscovered” alpacas as a source of raw material for exquisite textiles when he found a few bails of alpaca fiber in a Liverpool

warehouse that he then experimented with milling. Titus Salt became the richest man in Yorkshire weaving glamorous alpaca dresses for wealthy women. For a brief period, alpaca textiles became chic in Victorian society (Salt biography). This was an important milestone in the history of the commercialization of alpaca fiber. However the practice did not persist – perhaps due to competition from textiles of the mystic Orient that had captured the fancy of Victorian Society, such as South Asian cotton and East Asian silk.

As geographers and anthropologists ventured into the Andes in the 19th and 20th centuries, they witnessed mountain landscapes that included alpacas which were absent in lower elevations. At the time, the distribution of alpacas was not recognized as a legacy of Spanish conquest. Rather, the distribution of alpacas was presumed a result of intolerance to warmer climates. According to 19th and 20th century geographical resources, alpacas were relegated to life in the *altiplano* and other mountain elevations (Frye 1894). Alpacas were imagined to be an exclusively highland species due to the direct observations made of their distribution by explorers (Somerville 1854).¹ This conception of alpacas persisted among Europeans and Americans into the late 20th century. Misconceptions about alpacas have so strongly persisted that one researcher has even identified eleven published instances, as recently as 1991, of claims that alpacas have always been milked by native peoples, which is a false assertion (Gade 1999).

¹ *Primary Geography* (Frye 1894) – makes the point that alpacas can only live at the equator because of the altitude provided by the Andean Mountain; *Physical Geography* (Somerville 1854) – “the Alpaca... lives in still more elevated places than the llama, its favorite haunts being on the streams descending from the snowy peaks” (p.465).

Figure 1.3: Range of camelids before and after the Spanish Conquest



(Gade 1999, p.104)

Alpacas in North America

A “new” and interesting fleece-bearing creature called an alpaca, viewed as elegant and mystical by admirers, began to capture the imaginations of animal hobbyists across the Northern continent of the Americas in the 1980s. People

with absolutely no experience in farming began to reinvent themselves as part-time farmers to accommodate their fascination with alpacas. In so doing, these Americans once again reimagined what an alpaca is and what they could be.

First Llamas then Alpacas

Alpacas existed only in North American zoos until the 1980s. The llama, another South American Camelid averaging twice the size of an alpaca, preceded the private importation of alpacas into the United States. Perhaps most notably, William Randolph Hearst held a small herd of one dozen llamas at his San Simeon estate in the 1920s. Perhaps the most famous has been Michael Jackson's pet llama "Louie." Llamas have been imported as pack animals, private zoo exhibits, companions, pets and living curiosities (Hoffman 2007).

As fleece-bearing creatures, llama owners discovered that the fiber had to be removed from time to time to prevent the llama from overheating on warm days and to avoid the fiber becoming unattractively matted and tangled. Some of this harvested llama fiber was used to make crafts. In the late 1970s interest grew in South American Camelids and the fleece they produced. As a result, some of the original llama enthusiasts began importing alpacas, an animal which in its native lands was selectively bred for high-quality fiber. The first non-zoological importation of alpacas to the United States occurred in 1980 (Hoffman 2007).

Importations, the Registry, and the growth of the national herd

Alpacas were imported in significant numbers to the United States in a fifteen year period between 1983 and 1998. During that time, a national organization called the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA) was established to develop policies and promote ownership of alpacas. The membership of AOBA voted to establish a registry of alpacas. In the first three months of 1989, most of the approximately 600 alpacas in private ownership in the United States were admitted to the registry. These animals were almost entirely of Chilean descent (Hoffman 2007).

The newly formed Alpaca Registry Incorporated (ARI) required blood-typing of all alpacas admitted to the registry. The ARI further required that newly registered alpacas be the offspring of registered parents. Relatively inexpensive allele marker profiles, a type of gene testing, had recently become available to public laboratories and were useful for this purpose. The ARI employed this technology. Thus, all animals in the registry have been genetically profiled. The objective was to create a “perfect registry” (Hoffman 2007).

Registry data can be used to track positive and negative animal traits, prove ownership, identify the source of genetic diseases, and other valuable inquiries. For alpacas imported after the implementation of the Registry established rigorous criteria for screening positive traits, which were performed prior to export from South America and genetic profiling. The profound success

of the Registry has much to do with producers' interest in each alpaca's ancestry, commonly referred to as "bloodlines" (Safley 2006).

In the 1990s, additional animals were imported from Chile, as well as the first imports from Bolivia and a series of large importations from Peru. By 1998, ARI screeners had examined and approved 7,687 alpacas for entrance into the Registry. The Registry had grown to around 30,000 alpacas. An initiative to close the Registry and therefore not allow additional imported alpacas into the Registry was gaining momentum. Several factors were pressed the consideration of this issue. Fear of "hoof and mouth disease" spreading into the United States loomed over all animal importations. The Peruvian government suddenly banned the exportation of alpacas, thought to be from a realization of the potential threat exports would have on the future of Peru's own alpaca fiber industry. Many influential producers believed that the 9000 or so founding animals already in the Registry were sufficient to build a national alpaca herd. The motion to close the Registry passed (Hoffman 2007).

Since the closure of the Registry, the national herd of alpacas has grown steadily. The number of registered alpacas has increased from 606 in 1989 to over 184,000 in 25 years (ARI Registrations). Alpacas are raised at over 8,000 farms (USDA Agricultural Census 2009) dispersed among all fifty states (Figure 1.3). Most states now recognize alpacas as standard livestock, rather than exotic animals.

Figure 1.4: Map of the distribution of alpaca farms in North America from the ARI



(Alpaca Registry Inc. 2010)

Fiber Artists, Natural Fibers & the Fleece of the Gods

Much like sheep and llamas, alpacas must be shorn annually to remove their abundant fiber. From the earliest stages of the alpaca ownership in the United States, alpaca enthusiasts recognized the utility of their woolen fleece, typically referred to as “alpaca fiber.” Some of the allure of alpaca fiber comes from the Quechua and Aymara people who have long made exquisite textiles from the fleece. These Amerindian cultures have kept alive the traditional pre-Hispanic belief that alpacas bear the “fleece of the Gods.” Andean peasant farmer’s symbiosis with and spiritual love of their animals (Ishizawa and

Fernandez 2002) adds to the mysticism of alpacas in the American imagination. Alpaca owners also discovered that the naturally-colored alpaca fiber was warmly embraced by “fiber artists” for hand-spinning, knitting, weaving, felting and others craft making. Textiles and crafts handmade by fiber artists were the first American alpaca products.

As more people acquired alpacas, fiber artists became increasingly aware of the growing supply of alpaca fiber. People producing alpaca fiber (hereafter referred to as “alpaca producers”) and fiber artists have been natural business partners. For decades, the selling of raw alpaca fiber to fiber artists has been a source of income for the alpaca producers. Over the years, many fiber artists have become alpaca producers and many alpaca producers have learned the fiber arts.

As the supply of finished alpaca products has increased, demand for alpaca products seems to keep pace. Alpaca producers have found ways to convert their alpaca fiber into a wide variety of textile products as the alpaca fiber industry in the United States has matured. Machine-made items produced at specialty mills are now common. It is widely believed that alpaca fiber production will someday achieve quantities required for commercial processing.

CHAPTER 2: REIMAGINING ALPACAS IN THE UNITED STATES

The Alpaca Lifestyle

“Raising alpacas is a lifestyle and investment available to many, from the empty-nester to a family with children to the professional looking for an outlet to daily stress” (I Love Alpacas). Alpaca ownership has grown well beyond the original llama enthusiasts of the early 1980s. Many of the 77 million American “baby boomers” moving into retirement have adopted alpaca ownership in order to participate in an idealized rural lifestyle. Alpaca ownership has been promoted as an investment, which has attracted livestock speculators. Alpacas have also become a feature of the organic farming movement; as one recent marketing campaign suggests, “Thinking about going green? Think alpacas” (MOPACA ad). Alpacas are an increasingly popular choice for young families with small acreage that want to build a family farm. Generous tax incentives, such as those granted in the 2003 US Farm Bill (Figure 2.1), have provided encouragement for people to become involved with alpacas regardless of their primary motivations. No matter how they arrived at the decision, an unusual bond exists between owner and animal.

The alpaca – alpaca owner relationship is one that confounds regular descriptions of the animal – human relationship. People in the alpaca industry have a strong bond to the species and their individual animals; to owners, alpacas are both livestock and pet. Their ‘pet status’ is derived from their gentle

demeanor, cuteness and family-friendliness, which in turn allows their owners to treat them like giant, personable, living teddy bears.

Perhaps in part due to their “cuteness,” alpacas occupy spaces where other livestock would not be permitted. They appear in suburbs. Some are kept in backyards. Yet they are also a farm animal. Their ‘livestock status’ is derived from their fleece producing ability. During the 2000s, alpacas achieved several agricultural milestones, such as being counted as their own category in the USDA Agricultural Census, given specific incentives in the US Farm Bill, and recognized as official livestock in most states (Figure 2.1). Whether or not the primary intent, owners are engaged in an agricultural endeavor. Most alpaca owners consider their alpacas to be both family pets as well as farm animals.

Figure 2.1: Strengthening reimagination of alpacas as livestock



Even if agriculture is not the alpaca owner's primary motivation, alpaca producers acknowledge that the agricultural justification for raising alpacas is their fleece. This justification is different than many of the other alternative livestock which have been popularized at one time or another over recent decades. The end product is not food, as is the case with elk, ostrich, emu, buffalo or bison. To many people seeking an enjoyable and sustainable livestock alternative, the no-kill-to-harvest aspect of the alpaca industry is an important attraction. These other livestock are typically as simple to care for as alpacas, and they tend to be less personable. When it comes to producing a raw animal product, alpacas require a fairly minimal investment of time – mainly the annual shearing of an alpaca (Meet the Alpaca).

People that engage in the alpaca industry tend to be very social with one another. People new to the alpaca industry will often find a mentor in the person from which they purchased their alpacas. They might also discover who in their area raises alpacas. They can attend alpaca shows and get involved in local or regional alpaca producer groups. The alpaca industry is an inherently social experience (O'Shaughnessy 2008).

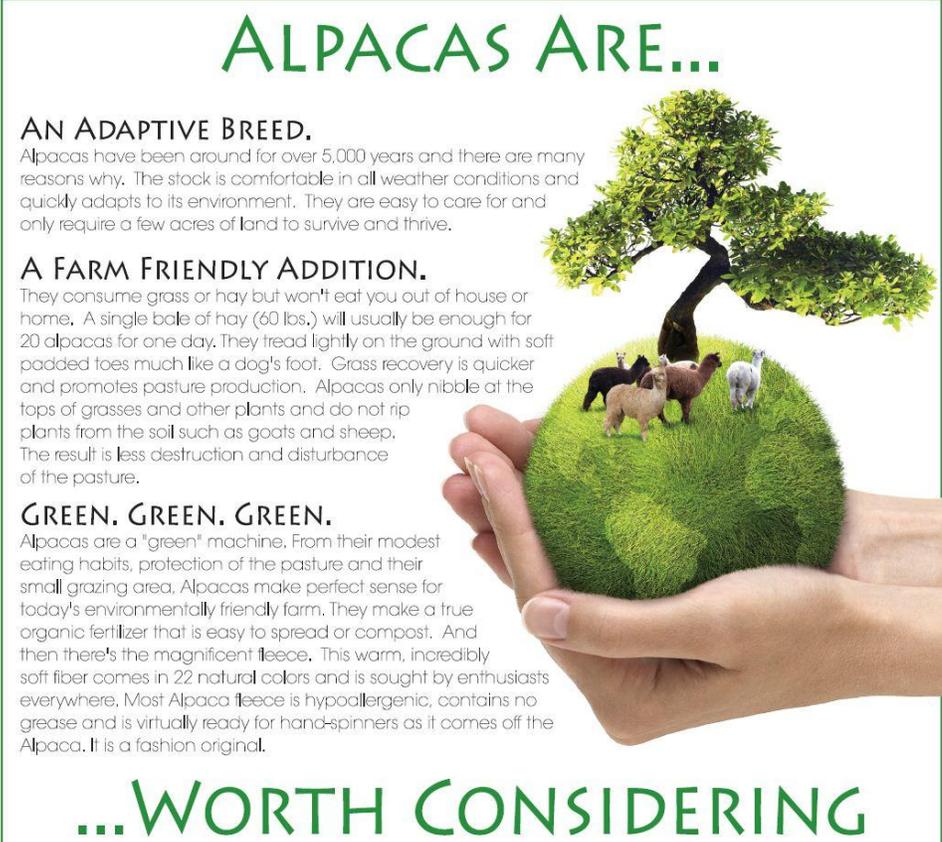
Almost universally, people in the alpaca industry have a story about when they "fell in love" with alpacas. Often it's "love at first sight." Sometimes the appreciation is gained over time. I've personally heard gentlemen comment that they were not amused when their wife desired a couple of alpacas, only to eventually succumb to the siren's call – or in the case of the alpaca, a "humming" sound. Reasons that people often cite for appreciating alpacas include but are

certainly not limited to, “their gentle nature,” “their graceful manner,” “their inquisitive demeanor,” and “their elegant poise.” People involved with alpacas seem positively “love struck.” There is some unexplainable attraction, some *je ne sais quoi* to the alpaca. This aspect of alpacas was the basis for a series of commercials² around the turn of the century that emphasized the “alpaca lifestyle” with producer testimonials (Figure 2.1).

Other qualities of alpacas tend to attract people to the alpaca lifestyle. Alpacas do well in a variety of climates, as long as they are shorn annually – as a result people produce alpaca fiber whether they have intentions to use it or not. Alpacas have padded feet, so they are relatively gentle on pasture (or yard, as it may be). They are fairly resilient creatures that do not require an extraordinary amount of care. They do not require a large area to be kept, and when kept in small areas, they are fairly easy to clean up after because of their tendency to use “poop piles.” They can be trained to lead on a rope and respond to verbal cues. They have lower teeth with dental plates above, so they are not capable of biting as hard as another animal might. They are not as destructive as some other livestock. They are easy to enclose. To people attracted to the idea of raising animals, these are significant factors for choosing alpacas over another species. These and a dozen additional reasons to raise alpacas are promoted in the advertisement displayed in Figure 2.2. As the ad insinuates, alpacas are now promoted as a “green” livestock.

² Cable TV commercials were created and run by two groups in particular. The AOBA national producers association ran one series, and the “I Love Alpacas dot Com” advertising group ran another series.

Figure 2.2: advertisement touting the agricultural benefits of raising alpacas



ALPACAS ARE...

AN ADAPTIVE BREED.
Alpacas have been around for over 5,000 years and there are many reasons why. The stock is comfortable in all weather conditions and quickly adapts to its environment. They are easy to care for and only require a few acres of land to survive and thrive.

A FARM FRIENDLY ADDITION.
They consume grass or hay but won't eat you out of house or home. A single bale of hay (60 lbs.) will usually be enough for 20 alpacas for one day. They tread lightly on the ground with soft padded toes much like a dog's foot. Grass recovery is quicker and promotes pasture production. Alpacas only nibble at the tops of grasses and other plants and do not rip plants from the soil such as goats and sheep. The result is less destruction and disturbance of the pasture.

GREEN. GREEN. GREEN.
Alpacas are a "green" machine. From their modest eating habits, protection of the pasture and their small grazing area, Alpacas make perfect sense for today's environmentally friendly farm. They make a true organic fertilizer that is easy to spread or compost. And then there's the magnificent fleece. This warm, incredibly soft fiber comes in 22 natural colors and is sought by enthusiasts everywhere. Most Alpaca fleece is hypoallergenic, contains no grease and is virtually ready for hand-spinners as it comes off the Alpaca. It is a fashion original.

...WORTH CONSIDERING

(From the AOBA website's media for use by alpaca producers, March 2011)

Non-farmers develop a concept of clean country air and peacefulness that is often not the reality; the smell of feces, loud noises and such can be contrary to their expectations (Carolan 2007; Yarwood & Evans 2000). For people unaccustomed to traditional agriculture, alpacas might be an ideal livestock. They are more sanitary and less obnoxious than many other farm creatures. They tend to not smell badly. Alpacas communicate by softly humming. These are among the other reasons alpacas are tolerated in places that other livestock would not be accepted.

The “alpaca lifestyle” has attracted a variety of people to the endeavor. Banking on the appeal of an idealized rural lifestyle, successful television advertising campaigns have highlighted the “alpaca lifestyle.” Many producers cite these commercials as their first introduction to alpacas (Salisbury 2006). To some extent, because so many people first became interested in alpacas for lifestyle reasons, fiber production had been long under emphasized. However, in the past decade, alpacas have become “official” livestock in many respects, which has contributed to a strengthening of alpacas as a livestock (Figure 2.1)

The Alpaca Fiber Industry

The reason that alpacas have been promoted under the category of farm animal, granted livestock status, and considered a business enterprise comes down to a single factor... a general recognition among alpaca producers that “the alpaca exists to produce fleece” (Ideal Alpaca Community).

Alpaca fiber possesses an unusually soft “hand”. It is warm and comes in a wide variety of natural colors, thus allowing products to be made without dyeing. While alpaca fiber is commercially produced in Peru, fiber from North American animals has been little used... Owners can sell quality fiber from healthy animals to designers and craftspeople, who will make exclusive products targeted at niche markets... Owners and breeders agree that development and use of the fiber is an ideal way to add value to the alpaca livestock industry. – Fiber Scientist (Jakes 2000).

Within the alpaca community, there is a widely accepted premise that breeding more alpacas will eventually support a commercial alpaca fiber industry. Some lobbies within the larger community advocate the development of rigorous breed standards that will help push the characteristics of the average alpaca

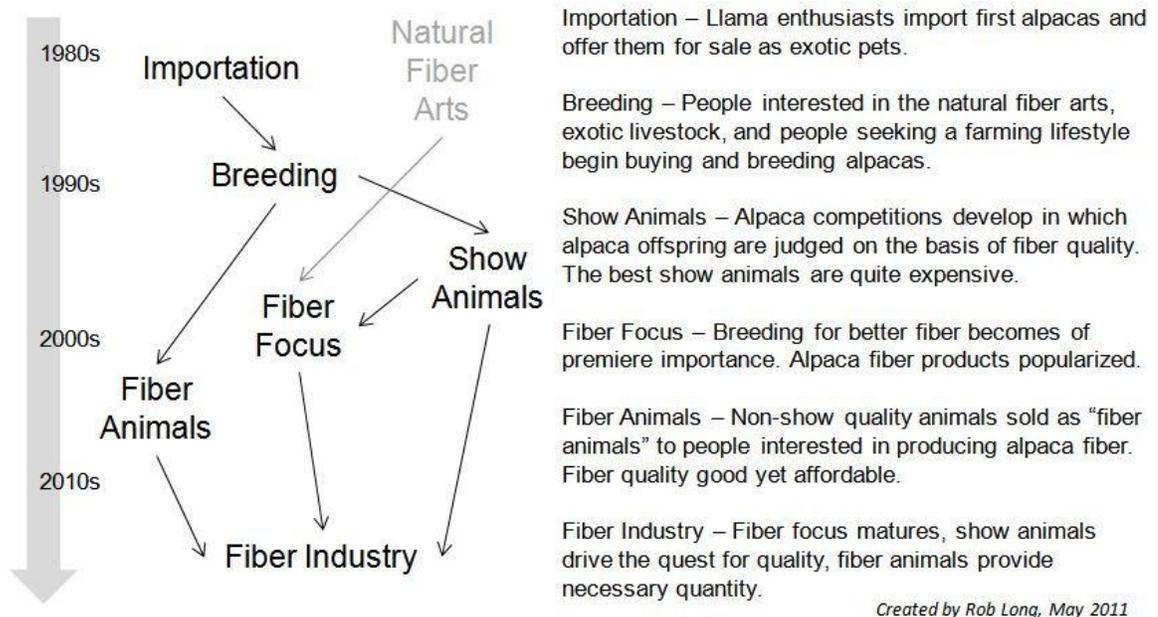
towards the consistent quality standards required for commercial processing. The number of alpacas is well on its way to approaching that which could be feasible to sustain commercial production of alpaca fiber. So are alpacas going to continue being a specialty livestock, primarily processing fiber through small specialty mills and traditional crafters and hobbyists?

Several interesting twists in the story of alpacas in North America became apparent around the close of the first decade of the 21st century. The “United Nations International Year of the Natural Fiber” in 2009 was strongly embraced by the alpaca community – which held its own national alpaca conference along with the second international alpaca conference as a United Nations endorsed event (Year of Natural Fibres 2009). Simultaneously, a global financial crisis unlike any experienced in several generations deeply affected producer’s ability to rely on income from the sale of breeding stock. Given high profile encouragement and profit motives, alpaca producers have *en masse* begun to shift their focus towards creating value-added income from their annually harvested alpaca fiber.

Today’s ongoing shift to a fiber orientation is in stark contrast to the state of fiber production a decade ago. How could alpacas be a livestock if there was no product commissioned from their raising? For the first couple of decades of alpacas in the United States there were a large number of people focused exclusively on breeding more alpacas and selling them, with much less focus on what to do with the fiber. At some point, every new livestock venture has a “breeding stage” during which the “national herd” of a livestock is increased, and

this can be a profitable time for early adopters. This period eventually passes, and gives way to a time when breeding and fiber utilization exist as mutually reinforcing objectives in an alpaca fiber industry (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: evolution of an alpaca breeding industry to an alpaca fiber industry



During the breeding stage of the alpaca industry, a show system was developed by AOBA. This allowed producers to compete with one another on the basis of their animals’ confirmation and fiber qualities. “Show quality animals” commanded very high prices at high-profile alpaca auctions and became the basis upon which critics would call the alpaca industry a speculative livestock bubble (Saitone and Sexton, 2008).

An infamous interview was given by an owner of a large herd of alpacas in which he was asked something along the lines of ‘what do you do with your alpaca fiber?’ His response was that it wasn’t worth the effort to try to sell it

(Dugan 2007). This incident gained legendary status because of the publicity it drew to profiteers who were breeding and selling show quality animals while paying only scant attention to the potential fiber industry. For such a high profile alpaca breeder to have blatantly devalued the fiber aspect of the alpaca industry angered many. This lack of regard for an end product has invited many comparisons of the alpaca industry to previous livestock bubbles, in which the supposed end product was of little or no value compared to the livestock itself (Saitone and Sexton 2008; Wolf 2006). One of the purveyors of this argument, Richard Sexton (Saitone and Sexton 2008), was quoted in an interview as having heard many examples of people giving away their harvested fiber, which he stated “ought to be telling us something” (Rogers 2007).

Underutilization of harvested alpaca fiber has occurred for many reasons, including lack of processing capacity, lack of producer knowledge to add value to the fiber, and lack of ability to aggregate the fiber into batches for processing. Processing capacity has only recently begun to keep pace with the increasing amount of alpaca fiber produced. The industry has grown beyond the time when fiber artists were the primary consumers of alpaca fiber, although they remain the favored clientele of the alpaca producer.

Alpaca fiber can command a very respectable price. Raw blanket fleece,³ in my experience, sells quickly at twenty dollars per pound. A well “skirted” and

³ The “blanket” is the prime fleece of an alpaca, taken from behind the base of the neck to the base of the tail and down the sides from the backline to the ribs and the upper legs. Adult alpacas typically “shear out” (produce a useable amount of) 6 to 12 lbs. of fleece at their annual shearing; 40 to 70% of that is “blanket”, aka “prime fleece” or “firsts”. Note: other characteristics of the fleece affect overall quality and certain colors are in higher demand than others.

“picked” blanket fleece⁴ weighing two to five pounds can bring fifty to one hundred fifty dollars at alpaca shows, farmers markets, agricultural festivals, or on internet sales sites such as Ebay, Esty or Local Harvest.⁵ Unique colors such as “lavender rose grey,” “bright maroon” or “peachy medium fawn” and ultra-fine fleeces can bring twice or more that price. In order to fetch these prices for fiber, the producer has to be in tune with the community of fiber artists, especially the “hand spinners” who process raw fleece into yarn. However, not all alpaca fiber can be sold to hand spinners and other fiber artists. To otherwise profit from the production of alpaca fiber, some specialized knowledge is required.

Alpaca Fiber Production

Once the fiber has been shorn from the alpacas, the producer must know what to do with it. All fiber shorn from a producer’s alpacas in one season is called the “clip.” Only a portion of the clip is of high enough quality that it can be sold outright, in raw form, for the great prices mentioned above. The proportion of the clip that is of such high quality varies from producer to producer. The rest of the clip needs to be sorted and batched.

Sorting is the act of separating fleeces into bunches of fiber “graded” by the degree of fineness. Six grades are commonly recognized in a popular alpaca fiber sorting system (Coarse Broads). The fiber of an individual alpaca typically

⁴ A “skirted blanket” is one that contains only prime fleece, because the “seconds” surrounding it have been removed. “Picked” means that large vegetable matter in the fleece has been removed.

⁵ On 3/18/11, I conducted an internet search to confirm these ranges of price. On “Esty” in the “knitting” section a producer was selling “CSA shares” of fleece, “2 pounds prime fleece, well skirted, free of nearly all dust, dirt & debris” for \$150. Several unremarkable fleeces were for sale on “Local Harvest” for \$50. Hundreds of “Ebay” listings from \$0.99 to \$4 per ounce.

needs to be separated into three or more grades. Each graded bunch of fleece must then be combined with similar bunches of graded fleece from the whole clip. This process is called batching. In addition to grade, bunches of fleece must be matched by length (generally “woolen” and “worsted” length) and by color (there are twenty-two natural colors recognized by the ARI) and sometimes by “crimp style” (bold or fine). A producer’s clip could potentially be separated into over 500 distinct batches of fiber.⁶

The most complex challenge to getting alpaca fiber into production is this issue of batching. Each batch is good for a certain uses, but a minimum threshold amount is required for processing into an end product to be cost efficient. An alpaca producer might only create a few batches each year large enough to justify processing. The producer must then wrestle with what to do with the remainder of their clip. Producers have come up with a number of solutions to this problem.

Turning Fiber into Fashion

In 2011, about one-third of producers expect to harvest 50 to 100 pounds of “prime fleece”⁷ from their animals and about one-quarter expected to harvest between 100 and 300 pounds (AOBA Survey Data 2010). These amounts of

⁶ The number of batches can be reduced by combining similar colors and by reducing grading criteria. Generally, the most reduction possible is into color combinations known as “light,” “fawn,” “brown,” “mixed grey,” and “black”, and to reduce the number of grades from six to three, and to ignore length and crimp distinctions. An additional fiber processing step called “blowing” may be employed to blend several colors together, but this is rarely utilized due to its expense. Employing these techniques will reduce the quality of the finished products, so they do not truly solve the producer’s batching dilemma.

⁷ Please reference footnote 2 about “blanket.”

fiber can be made into a significant amount of products. Turning each producer's "fiber to fashion," (AOBA History)⁸ as a popular industry saying goes, can require a lot of work and planning. There are four primary methods of having products made.

Fiber artists are often available to commission a limited number of items. This can be quite expensive due to the amount of manual labor, but the quality of the workmanship tends to be excellent. Products made in this manner are prized for being "locally-sourced" and "handmade," and can fetch very high prices.

Alpaca producers can join cooperatives, which involves sending raw fiber to a collection facility and often involves buying shares in the cooperative. These groups will typically accept all batches of fiber from their member producers. Once the cooperative has collected enough fiber, they order a run of a batch-appropriate product. These products will be made available for purchase by the member producers for a fair share of the cost of production, which the producers can then resell.

Specialized natural fiber textile mills are capable of making alpaca products with reasonably sized batches of fiber. Cooperatives use these textile mills to create products for their members. It is very common for producers to send large enough batches directly to a mill while sending their smaller batches to a cooperative.

⁸ The first "Fiber to Fashion" winter conference was held in 2002 as part of a larger "fiber initiative" by AOBA; among alpaca producers this phrase has become common as a pseudonym for "vertical production" and the notion of utilizing alpaca fiber to its fullest potential.

Some alpaca producers create their own machine processing capacity, referred to as a “mini-mill.” These operations are typically run by producers who began processing their own clip and then decided to expand to processing other producer’s alpaca fiber for a profit. They generally specialize in alpaca fiber and have limited product lines. Producers appreciate that mini-mills will accept small batches of fiber and have expertise in processing alpaca fibers.

From these production options come hundreds of alpaca products. Common items include socks, scarves, hats, gloves, sweaters, throws, blankets, shawls, mats and rugs. The most ubiquitous alpaca item is the “Extreme Alpaca Sock,” which retails for \$24 a pair and boasts, “Nothing compares with the experience of wearing alpaca socks. Naturally warm, soft and dry. Alpaca fiber is a durable, eco-friendly alternative to synthetics with superior wicking abilities and unbelievable comfort. An all season cure for cold feet!” (Extreme Sock). This product is made by the Alpaca Fiber Cooperative of North America, whose motto is “The Fiber Is the Future!”

Challenged to the Commercialization of Alpaca Fiber

In his autobiography Henry Ford stated that, “Any customer can have any car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black” (Ford and Crowther 1922). Corollary to the textile industry is the “black sheep.” Historically wool producers would cull black sheep from their herd to reduce their occurrence in subsequent generations. Ultimately, a more fungible fleece was a more easily transportable fleece. If a sheep herd produces all white wool, a uniform “bale” of

wool can be produced and shipped to a textile factory. If a black fleece were in a bale of white, it would ruin an entire production run of white wool. Wool for commercial production is made white, because white will take any color dye and is thus more profitable (Ammer 1997). This Fordist approach is predominant in the textile industry.

The greatest challenge to the commercial use of alpaca fiber is that alpaca producers are unlikely to be capable of producing enough fleece of a single batch required for mass processing. As one producer has stated, “we don’t have enough animals in the U.S. to create a demand... we’re trying to build that supply” (Walton 2007). Even when the supply exists, to collect a large enough batch of fleece from hundreds of producers in one spot would incur significant transportation costs. A textile manufacturer would also require a guaranteed steady supply of the exact batch of fleece in order to make a large production commitment. This is not something that alpaca producers are currently able to do. The issues of batching are the weaknesses which have thus far prevented commercial production of alpaca fiber.

A Shifting Focus to Alpaca Fiber Production

A recent poll of members of the Midwest Alpaca Owner and Breeder Association (MOPACA) revealed that producers are overwhelmingly interested in learning more about how to prepare alpaca fiber, make products, and market them to customers.⁹ MOPACA, one of dozens of regional alpaca producer

⁹ MOPACA Board of Director Mary Licklider performed a “surveymonkey.com” online poll of the MOPACA membership in 2010. The poll received 44 responses out of 116 members; results

organizations, in 2010 inaugurated a three day educational event packed with dozens of classes about utilizing and adding value to raw alpaca fiber. “Fiber U” was so enormously successful that it was immediately declared to be an annual event. Prior to this MOPACA would only hold a one-day fiber related seminar every few years. This trend towards focusing on value-added fiber production is also strongly substantiated by nationwide data.

According to the most recent survey report by the national producers’ association, called AOBA, there are many indications that members are increasing their focus on bringing fiber into full production. Participation in cooperatives is continuing to rise. Over half of members are having fleece spun into yarn by fiber mills. About half of members sold raw alpaca fleece to fiber artists such as hand spinners. Just shy of half of members acquire alpaca producers wholesale, from some other source, to be resold. Of the later, over half sell products out of a farm store, and forty percent sell products at events and festivals (AOBA Survey Report 2008). This is an increase in all respects since the 2005 survey, and builds upon the trend between 2002 and 2005 when the number of producers reporting alpaca fiber product sales increased from one-in-three to 46% (AOBA Survey Report 2005). This may be some indication that the ‘fiber initiative’ launched by AOBA in 2002 to promote alpaca fiber products was somewhat successful, (AOBA History) or at least the national producers’ organization has been keyed into a growing trend among producers.

were shared by email. 79% of respondents choose “marketing and fiber education” as their preferred focus.

Times of financial strain are known to push family farms to diversify their agricultural enterprise in order to sustain their operations (Nickerson et al 2001). The recent economic recession has encouraged producers to make a profit from every aspect of their alpaca endeavor. By 2010, 69.9% of respondents reported some income from the sale of raw or processed fiber, 63.7% reported selling alpaca products, and 69.9% of producers indicated that they did something such as knit, felt or spin their alpaca fiber themselves (AOBA Survey Data 2010). By all accounts and indications, producers are focused on putting their fiber into production with increasing vigor.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this study is meant to be on the relationship between alpaca owners and their alpacas. While this may occur in a variety of contexts, from businesses that are primarily focused on profit to endeavors focused on enjoyment, the motivation for having alpacas is not the point of this study. Rather, it is an exploration of how the representation of alpacas has been reimagined by humans as useful for these and other purposes. In order to examine this, a framework that allows for multiple points of view to be held simultaneously and studied is required; a task well suited for the discipline of geography. The “new” animal geographers have been calling for the consideration of phenomena that emphasize animal – human relationship components, such as that which exists in the alpaca industry.

Animal Geographies

Until recently, animals have been largely relegated to being mere features of a landscape or pointed to as evidence of “wildness.” Geographers of the 19th and 20th centuries generally referred to animals in this mechanistic manner, although characterizing them as a more dynamic element compared to vegetation, climate or geologic features. For instance, consider the opening line of “Chapter 5: Barriers to Distribution and Means of Dispersal,” *Ecological Animal Geography* (1951) that notes:

The extremely rapid reproduction of living organisms causes them to spread in every direction, constantly tending to enlarge the area which they inhabit, so that no place in any way capable of supporting life remains unoccupied. When a catastrophe such as a

flood or a volcanic eruption destroys life at some place, it is soon replaced (Allee and Schmidt 1951).

From the second edition of the original translation for Richard Hesse's *Tiergeographie auf oekologischer Grundlage* (1924), this represented state-of-the-art animal geography during this era. The publication included Hesse's original research, an extensive collection of decades of previous works and the work of the geographers who translated the book. This simplistic treatment of animals and their distribution favored biomechanical functions and climatic effects over that of human influences. The approach, rooted in the works of Charles Darwin (Johnston 1997), was prevalent in geographic literature until the humanistic revolution of the late 20th century.

Carl Sauer was a renowned critic of "environmental determinism" (Johnston 1997) which was present in earlier approaches to geography and supported a mechanistic view of animals. In *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals* (1952), Sauer highlights that animals, once placed into a landscape and managed by people, transformed a natural landscape into a cultural landscape. Sauer's "Berkley School" of geographic thought, which broadly considered society – nature relationships, became a persuasive force within the discipline of geography and contributed to a Kuhnian shift¹⁰ in perspective during the humanistic and behavioral revolutions of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Peet, 1998). In the process, animals began to be considered as potential agents of human change rather than merely landscape features.

¹⁰ Thomas Kuhn asserted that scientific thought goes through periodic paradigm shifts in his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1962).

When animal – human relationships first began to be considered academically, animal perceptions became an important consideration. In the late 1970s, Yi-Fu Tuan explored the animal – human relationship from the animal perspective in his seminal work, *Topophilia* (1978). Animal senses were highlighted, celebrated and validated as legitimate to human concern. He asserted that:

The uniqueness of the human perspective should be evident when we pause to ask how the human reality must differ from that of other animals. Contrary to appearances, a person cannot enter imaginatively into the life of his dog: canine sense organs diverge too far from our own for us to leap into the dog's world of smells, sounds, and sights (Tuan 1978).

Note in particular that Tuan refers to humans as one of many types of animals. Sensitivity to animal perception became valid in academic discussion.

In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships (1996), written by James Serpell, further elaborates upon this theme by probing the social status of pets and livestock. He demonstrated that humans have long required animals to define themselves and considered how pet-keeping can undermine the distinction between human and non-human. As a British-educated zoologist with a clear bent towards cultural geography, Serpell elaborates upon the complicated relationships between animals and humans from their respective viewpoints. His works have been cited and ideas incorporated into the new animal geographies.

The New Animal Geographies

In their literature review article, *Animal Geographies* (2002), Jody Emel, Chris Wilbert and Jennifer Wolch describe the new animal geographies as being “inspired by the encounter between human geography and social theory, cultural studies, selected natural sciences, and environmental ethics.” They point to numerous works from the 1990s and early 2000s, a time when geographers were reviving interest in the geographical study of animals. This was demonstrated by projects that considered the human – animal divide, how this changed over time, the status of pets versus wild urban animals, the representations of animals, as well as how animals shape both personal and collective identity. In *Beyond the Clearing: towards a dwelt animal geography* (2008), Catherine Johnston posits that, “at its most basic level, animal geographers seek to make nonhumans visible in order to ensure that their material (and in some cases, emotional) needs are not unthinkingly ignored or automatically placed below our own.”

These geographies are in contrast to the commoditization of agricultural animals and focus on economic systems in which agricultural animals exist. “Economistic approaches cannot... fully explain the geographies of farm animals, and more culturally sensitive approaches are needed to understand links between livestock and place... and consider in more detail how livestock have been re-imagined to fit within new modes of accumulation” (Yarwood & Evans 2000).

Yarwood and Evans were essential in assimilating the geography of agriculture with that of the new animal geographers, particularly with their contribution to the Philo and Wilbert edited collection, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: new geographies of animal – human relations* (2000). Their theoretical contribution has accepted animals back into the consideration of cultural landscapes and accounted for how individuals and communities of like-minded animal enthusiasts alter landscapes with their choices and preferences. They make a strong argument that:

Political economy approaches provide only a partial understanding of the geography of livestock... they are unable to cope with the complex spatial relationships that have developed between animals and people or groups of people... culturally informed perspectives become relevant to help interpret and reinterpret facets of agricultural change... cultural influences can help to provide a better understanding of spatial and temporal variations in animal distributions (Yarwood and Evans 2000).

The ideas of linking concern of animal perceptions, human emotions for animals, and agricultural and other uses of animals together is a useful backdrop for the consideration of the alpaca – producer relationship. This allows us to see past the dominant approach of political economy¹¹ which tends to focus on agricultural policy. For example, although tax policy might serve as a significant incentive for people to engage in alpaca production (Dugan 2007), factors contributing to the spatial distribution of those people and their animals are not primarily econometric ones.

¹¹ Political economy as used here is in reference to modernist economic methodology and political moralist theories of wealth distribution and public-choice.

Yarwood and Evans remind us of Sauer's concepts that were proposed six decades ago when they state that, "at very least, there is a need to recognize that farm animals have, quite literally, been constructed by people to fit into particular rural spaces" (Yarwood and Evans 2000). For this reason, the study of alpacas, alpaca owners and the alpaca industry seems to be firmly seated within the literature of these new animal geographers and in the tradition of Sauer's and Tuan's geographies.

Alpacas in Academic Literature

The majority of academic articles that mention the term "alpaca" reside in veterinary medicine literature regarding South American Camelids. A few articles discuss the use of "alpaca" in the context of textiles; the term "alpaca" being used in the same manner as "cashmere" in reference to the wool of the *Capra hircus laniger*, commonly known as the Cashmere goat. In addition, numerous anthropological articles mention alpacas. Four articles focus specifically on the contemporary alpaca phenomenon; all come from the fields of business and economics.

One article is quite provocatively named, *Alpaca Lies? Speculative Bubbles in Agriculture: Why They Happen and How to Recognize Them* (2008). This article puts forward a methodology by which an agricultural speculative bubble might be identified. Authors Tina Saitone and Richard Sexton utilize breeding animal and raw fiber value information, derived from alpaca livestock

auctions and international alpaca fiber market sales, to substantiate their methodology:

We presented an investment framework to assess whether current prices for U.S. alpaca stock can be supported by market fundamentals or whether they likely represent a speculative bubble that is destined to burst to the dismay of investors who have been swayed by the persuasive television commercials and the animals' charming appearance. In this regard, the evidence seems to be rather overwhelming that the current prices are not supportable by economic fundamentals and, therefore, are not sustainable. Thus, our conclusion is that the U.S. alpaca industry represents the latest in the rich history of speculative bubbles in agriculture (Saitone and Sexton 2008).

The authors claim that alpaca owners are caught in a "feedback loop" in which "prices are only high because people believe the prices will continue to rise."

They briefly discuss lifestyle motivations present within the alpaca industry when they state that, "investor envy in agricultural settings may extend beyond financial returns to include the impression that extant investors have escaped the urban rat race in favor of a happier rural lifestyle" (Saitone and Sexton 2008). In essence, the authors assert that lifestyle motivations, which are of no inherent economic value, have at least something to do with the increased valuations of alpacas which are causing alpacas as an investment to appear to be livestock bubble.

The next two articles attempt to explain the *je ne sais quoi*¹² of the alpaca and the lifestyle motivations for ownership from the perspectives of business and marketing research. Cathi McMullen's "Romancing the alpaca: Passionate consumption, collection and companionship" (2008) puts forward the proposition that, "reinventing oneself as an alpaca breeder illustrates how forms of

¹² A French phrase which roughly translates as, "I can't explain why, but I like it."

consumption can enable people to become players in the construction of meaningful life experiences.” Her article focuses on the intense passion alpaca owner have with their animals and with the alpaca endeavor. McMullen states that they are engaged in the hobby of collecting alpacas, in which case investment becomes a secondary purpose. Unlike many other forms of collection, collecting breeding animals is a “collection in use.” For some segment of alpaca owners, McMullen points out that this becomes a “dynamic collection,” in which “considerable time, energy, and money are spent in the quest to breed the perfect alpaca.” She points out that, “a collection then loses value if a breeder’s level of improvement does not maintain pace with those of others in the industry.” In paying attention to the owners of high-end, “elite quality” alpacas and auctions they attend, McMullen discusses the same sub-phenomena within the larger alpaca industry on which Saitone & Sexton focus. McMullen, however, does an excellent job of explaining the motivations of alpaca owners by using the theory of “passionate consumerism” (McMullen 2008).

Nicholas O’Shaughnessy writes a response to McMullen’s article in the same issue of *The Journal of Business Research*. Although endorsing her core thesis, he is unsatisfied with a simplistic explanation of collecting passionately. He states in *Romancing Alpacas: A commentary* (2008) that, “words like ‘enchantment’ and ‘passion’ are descriptively inadequate to capture what is offered.” He identifies the need to, “explain this phenomena with a greater emphasis on the specifically contemporary appeals, a locus in the modern and postmodern condition,” and ultimately concludes that, “the kind of classy

idiosyncrasy it represents is not so much whacky new-age consumerism as rebellion against all organized consumerist conformity.” Seeming not as captivated with alpacas as McMullen, O’Shaughnessy points out that alpacas “are still animals and not proto-human, a fact that their infatuated owners seem on occasion to forget.” He acknowledges that despite what some might describe as the “pathetic fallacy” (quoted from, but not his words) of anthropomorphizing alpacas, what is of true importance is the relationship that alpaca owners obtain with one another through the alpaca community. He contends that, “alpaca consumption is a richly social experience” indicative of the development of a “pan-national trans-national consumptive community,” and interwoven with the motivation of being a “status-signaling activity.” O’Shaughnessy summarizes that:

The appeal of alpaca consumption relates to the following consequences: 1) community; 2) aesthetics; 3) ideology; 4) involvement; 5) the role of developing and mastering expertise; 6) the satisfaction of wants related to human-animal interactions; and, finally, 7) pleasurable from taking the guilt out of pleasure!

He concludes that, “alpaca farming is a half-way house between business and leisure” (O’Shaughnessy 2008). He does a fine job of building upon the groundwork laid by McMullen and develops a very well elaborated explanation of lifestyle factors involved in alpaca ownership.

In *Alpaca ownership or entrepreneurship? The New Zealand case* (2009), Alonso Abel Durante discusses what he discovered from surveying 233 alpaca producers in New Zealand. Abel Durante confirms that “lifestyle motivations” are of primary importance to people engaged in alpaca ownership. He describes the

alpaca industry as emerging as those alpaca owners with larger herds or those that open their farms to the public are doing so for financial gain. Abel Durante identifies that producers need more knowledge about how to market their alpaca products.

Reimagining Alpacas, Reimagining Lifestyle

The alpaca – alpaca producer relationship defies conventional expectations of the animal – human or livestock – farmer relationship. This project will contribute to literature that “considers the place of animals in farmers’ construction of rurality” (Yarwood and Evans 2000) while answering the call for more research regarding “how and why this line shifts over time and space and links between animals and human identities – namely, the ways in which ideas and representations of animals shape personal and collective identity” (Emel, Wilbert & Wolch 2002). After examining how alpaca producers represent themselves when engaged in the business of selling alpacas, the alpaca owners’ profound attachment to their animals and the importance of the alpaca lifestyle to the alpaca industry will be considered.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The alpaca community has an immutable online presence; perhaps because the rise of alpacas in the United States and popularization of the internet occurred simultaneously. Membership surveys by the national producers' organization reveals that the vast majority of producers engage in activity on alpaca websites (AOBA Survey Report 2008). In addition, the Alpaca Registry's (ARI) online databases and other industry websites are important sources of information for producers. Whether to research alpaca topics, sell alpaca fiber or livestock, or keep in touch with the alpaca community, an internet presence is nearly essential.

The most prolific form of internet participation by alpaca producers is on alpaca sales websites. Producers obtain memberships to these websites in order to demonstrate a high level of involvement in the alpaca industry, list their alpacas for sale, promote the stud services of their male alpacas, market alpaca products or services, and to keep up to date with alpaca news. Producers are encouraged to offer information about themselves, their animals, and their farm or ranch on these websites. They reveal a great deal of information regarding their attitudes towards the alpaca industry in their self-descriptive narratives on alpaca-specific livestock sales websites.

These websites are where producers tell their stories, construct their personal narratives, and signal to other alpaca producers what attitudes they hold about the alpaca lifestyle, the alpaca industry and the alpaca community.

These were the narratives from which qualitative data were mined. Three alpaca specific websites were selected for examination; Alpaca Nation, Open Herd and Midwest Alpaca Farms.¹³

For this paper, alpaca producers with an internet presence on alpaca sales websites in the states of Missouri and Kansas were examined. Missouri and Kansas are the core membership states of a regional organization called the Midwest Alpacas Owners and Breeders Association, commonly referred to as MOPACA. These producers own ARI registered alpacas. MOPACA and ARI are associated with one another through the national producers' organization AOBA. In addition to their participation in alpaca sales websites, most of these producers are also members of MOPACA, AOBA and the ARI.

This study employs an industry specific, twenty-six variable qualitative coding system to derive data that was then georeferenced. The objective is to examine the alpaca phenomena at the producer's level and discern if there are specific aspects of the phenomena that tend to characterize urban or rural producers.

Qualitatively Assessing the Narratives of Alpaca Producers

A well-developed producer narrative would include statements that reveal attitudes about various aspects of the alpaca lifestyle and the alpaca industry. During the course of examining the narratives, common phrases, descriptions

¹³ Alpaca Nation was selected for being the largest of these websites, Open Herd for being Alpaca Nation's closest rival site, and Midwest Alpaca Farms because it is the sales website for the regional producer's organization of the study area.

and adages appeared with significant frequency. Many were business-related, many were lifestyle-centered. Business interests involved discussing the potential of the industry, capturing tax incentives, and offering alpaca related services. Lifestyle interests included enjoying rural life, making alpacas a family-oriented activity and touting the enjoyment of raising alpacas.

When examining a narrative, I attempted to assess whether a producer was more inclined towards business or lifestyle motivations. The manner in which an activity was presented provided useful clues. For example, consider the processing of alpaca fiber into a textile product. There are discernable profit and hobby motivations to engage in this activity. If a producer sings in their description of a 'lush, bright, dreamy' appearance of the fleece or how wonderful it is to feel and handle their fleece, they are using the language of hobbyists. This would be categorized as a lifestyle aspect for the activity. If instead a producer promotes the durability of the product or beneficial properties of their textiles, they are using the language that is decidedly more business-like.

Not all statements lend themselves to a business / lifestyle distinction. Some statements were about particular activities or beliefs that can be a mix of business and lifestyle, such as attending shows, being involved in alpaca organizations or highlighting one's experience with raising alpacas. Other statements make reference to activities that are neither inherently business or lifestyle factors, such as having stock with particular bloodlines or stock with numerous awards.

In order to categorize the common motivations for a large group of alpaca producers, a qualitative coding system was created to identify and distinguish attitudes within the dense narratives from which data were extracted. The result was a twenty-six variable, qualitative coding system (Figure 4.1). Each variable was a mini-theme derived from frequently reoccurring statements.

Figure 4.1: Twenty-six mini-theme coding key

LIFESTYLE (8 mini-themes)

- 1) G = exactly the word “lifestyle” employed
- 2) H = specifically “country / farm living” / working in “nature”
- 3) I = specifically “family”
- 4) J = specifically “retirement” or plan to “retire”
- 5) K = specifically “religion / god” or religious wording such as “God bless”
- 6) L = specifically “alpaca community”
- 7) M = initial experience; “fell in love with alpacas” or “enchanted”
- 8) N = ownership experience, “joy” or “love” of alpacas / the alpaca “dream” or “adventure”

BUSINESS (8 mini-themes)

- 9) O = “investment” or “profit” motive
- 10) P = specifically “tax benefits”
- 11) Q = “potential / strength of industry”
- 12) R = LLC in name or clear “business” attitude / emphasis?
- 13) S = animal focused? [Health care / nutrition, boarding, breeding, handling / showing]
- 14) T = offer other alpaca related services, not list as “animal focus”
- 15) U = fiber focused? [Fiber utilization, improved characteristics, processing, vertical production]
- 16) V= sell alpaca products or improved fiber (not just raw fiber)?

EMPHASIS (10 mini-themes)

- 17) W = quality of stock exceptional, specifically mentioned with details; or “great genetics”
- 18) X = quality of fleece exceptional, specifically mentioned with details
- 19) Y = specific bloodlines; particular animal named or specific source farm or co-op named

- 20) Z = award winning animals
- 21) AA = show attendance mentioned
- 22) AB = facility or major property modifications for alpacas
- 23) AC = alpaca experience, or making a point to stress number of years in the business
- 24) AD = customer support after the sale
- 25) AE = industry involvement indicated by stating organization memberships
- 26) AF = reasonable pricing or excellent value stressed

Mini-Theme Coding Development

The qualitative coding system employed in this study was based on themes that emerged in the self-descriptive narratives of alpaca producers involved in alpaca sales websites. To develop this system, hundreds of similar statements were grouped into reoccurring mini-themes; each mini-theme constituted a variable in this study. The result was the discovery of twenty-six mini-themes, which became the basis of the coding system.

This is based in the qualitative methodology of discovering overall themes then developing a code of more specific interpretive themes suggested by Iain Hay (2005). This comes from the tradition of “grounded theory,” but as performed for this study, the coding scheme was not validated by other researchers. Rather, this process relied heavily on my in-depth knowledge of the language of the alpaca industry. Explaining my understanding of alpaca industry language to a colleague in order that they may validate my coding scheme would have interjected just as much bias as not validating the coding scheme at all.

This development process involved three preliminary stages. The first stage required learning the terminology and becoming well-versed in many facets of the alpaca industry. Much of this understanding was gained over nine years of experience within the industry. This required a conscious effort on my part to stay well-informed about the current industry and hobbyist literature, as well as availing myself to involvement in the social and business events of the industry. The next step was to become familiar with existing writings and surveys which had been performed by, within or about the industry. This then led to the final stage of developing the coding procedure. Once established, it was applied to the final population of alpaca owners.

The coding system emerged over four test iterations. The initial three iterations of code development required scouring narratives while evaluating common statements, objectives and motivations. Code development involved selecting a group of alpaca producers, reading their narratives, summarizing their attitudes, categorizing those summaries, adding new categories as needed, and combining categories when practical into mini-themes. The emerging code was then applied to the next selected group of producers; a group consisting of producers in the next state on the source website. This step was repeated approximately 150 times during the first three iterations of coding development. For the fourth iteration, testing the twenty-six variable coding system involved coding 155 producers in 16 States (Figure 4.2).

Alpaca Nation, used as the source website for narratives during this coding system development phase, is by far the industry leader among alpaca

sales websites. Surveys have recorded that the majority of producers use Alpaca Nation; 75% of respondents reported using Alpaca Nation in 2008 (AOBA Survey Report 2008). In 2010, 71.8% of respondents reported using Alpaca Nation to buy their “first alpacas” and 58.8% reported using Alpaca Nation to buy their “last alpacas” (AOBA Survey Data 2010).

Figure 4.2: Iterations of coding development leading to final study

First, Second & Third Iterations

Objective: categorizing attitudes, identify mini-themes, developing codes
Source: Alpaca Nation website producer narrative (2487 total listings March 2009)
Selection: average of 10 producers from each state, at random
Results: approximately 1500 narratives examined over three iterations
Performed March 2009 to April 2010

Fourth Iteration

Objective: test coding scheme on full state populations
Source: Alpaca Nation website (2332 total listings May 2010)
Selection: the 16 states with the fewest alpaca producers
Results: 155 producers coded
Performed May to September 2010

Final Study

Objective: Code mini-themes of the study population
Sources: Alpaca Nation, Open Herd & Midwest Alpaca Farms websites (141 listings)
Selection: States of Missouri and Kansas
Results: 87 producers coded
Performed October 2010 to January 2011

The pool of subjects was narrowed down significantly for the final study by limiting the geographic area to alpaca producers in Missouri and Kansas. This was done to facilitate a reasonably sized project for georeferencing the coded data. This specific area was selected due to my well-developed familiarity with the alpaca market in this region, so as to notice if data was manifesting in some obvious anomalous manner.

In the application of the coding system to the final study pool, data sources were augmented by including narratives from more than a single website. The alpaca websites were expanded to include two more sources; “Open Herd,” the site which most directly competes with Alpaca Nation for subscribers and “Midwest Alpaca Farms,” the internet sales branch of MOPACA. This enriched the source material for data and enhanced the number of producers that could be examined in the study region.¹⁴

Alpaca Nation, Open Herd and Midwest Alpaca Farm results were combined. Each alpaca producers’ results were combined such that if a particular mini-theme was coded for across multiple sites, it would only be counted a single time in the data. Thus no artificial weight was given to a mini-theme due to one producer maintaining a presence on all three sites versus a producer with presence on only one site.

Georeferencing the resulting data

Using the USDA Economic Research Services’ Urban – Rural Continuum Codes, the 220 counties of the states of Missouri and Kansas were each assigned a “Beale code.” A Beale Code is an ordinal ranking of each county’s

¹⁴ A list of all MOPACA members was checked against a list of all farms engaged in the three selected ecommerce sites. 11 of 33 MOPACA members in Kansas and 14 of 55 MOPACA members in Missouri were not presently on any of the three sales sites used. The vast majority of these farms have been confirmed to not have alpacas for sale, thus would have no reason to be involved in alpaca ecommerce websites. A handful of the exceptions include three sizeable farms that appear to have made a conscience marketing strategy choice to advertise in industry and agriculture magazines and / or with vendor booths at alpaca shows, rather than competing with those farms that maintain a strong alpaca industry ecommerce presence.

degree of rurality (Definitions of Rural 2002).¹⁵ Each producer in the study population was assigned a Beale code corresponding to the county in which they live. Thus, the data attached to each producer was linked to a Beale code. Beale codes were used to sort these data in a spreadsheet. This enabled the analysis of the mini-themes in a geographic manner. Using Beale codes, producers could be compared with one another across the urban – rural continuum in a variety of ways.

Assumptions

It should be noted that there are alpaca owners who are not engaged in animal sales and thus would not appear on these websites. Some of these owners may have alpacas for fiber production, as “yard ornaments” (as people in the industry often call alpacas kept exclusively as pets), for the tax incentives, or some mix of these and other objectives that do not involve animal sales. Small scale alpaca ownership with no intent to breed or sell animals is a common version of alpaca ownership. It is assumed that these owners have small numbers of alpacas, they do not actively engage in the alpaca community, and in general have a small impact on the alpaca industry.

This study was performed on a study population. This is not held up as a statistically significant sample of alpaca producers in the United States. Given my experience with developing the coding system and with the alpaca industry in general, I believe that the results of this study are a fair representation of what is

¹⁵ USDA ERS Urban-Rural Continuum Codes were developed in 1975 by Calvin Beale, therefore the Codes are referred to as “Beale Codes”.

happening elsewhere in the United States. To the extent that Missouri and Kansas are representative of the entire United States, then so too does this study population represent the entire population of alpaca producers in the United States. This is an assumption upon which many discussion points and the conclusion are based.

The data resulting from this study are “one to one” statistics of an entire study population, thus significant in their own right. Statistical significances are of primary concern when representative samples are examined. For the purpose of deciding what mini-themes to focus on when discussing differences between producer groups georeferenced by Beale code, an arbitrary percentage was picked. If a variation of plus or minus more than 5% from the study population average was present, that mini-theme category was examined. Refer to Table 6.3, which is subject to the assumption that a 6% or greater difference was worthy of examination.

There are further assumptions being made in the georeferencing of these data. Because the precise point locations of these farms are known, it is possible to employ another spatial methodology to examine any number of aspects of these data. Given the data set as it currently exists, this is entirely possible and would constitute significant additional research. However, I chose to employ a well-recognized measure of rurality in order to facilitate some level of aggregation of these data into comparable classes. In so doing, all assumptions made in the creation of the Beale codes become assumptions of this study. This has an effect on the accuracy of the aggregated data, because ground-truthing

methods (an in-person assessment of local geographic factors) were not employed to verify that each of the eighty seven subjects were grouped by factors common to each grouping of rurality.

The methodology of this project assumes that I developed an appropriate coding system. Unlike classic grounded theory, I didn't perform the step of having another researcher validate my coding system. As previously mentioned, in the process of teaching someone the language of the alpaca industry I would have fouled the objectivity of the validation; merely creating a different, more convoluted set of assumptions. This study is performed on the basis of what could be called unvalidated grounded theory. In so doing, the coding system developed for this project are subject to my own biases as a researcher of this particular topic.

Biases

This study and thesis have been performed and written by an alpaca lifestyle, alpaca community, and alpaca industry participant. I have nine years of experience breeding alpacas, I have lectured to producers about the alpaca industry, I have sat on discussion panels, and I teach about alpacas to students. I am an advocate of an alpaca fiber industry. I view alpacas favorably and am subject to the same adoration of these creatures which I address in this paper. Like McMullen (2008), I use my own experience to explain features of the alpaca community and industry which are not readily access to "outsiders" and non-participants.

What I have attempted to do over the two years of developing this study was to temporarily disengage from the industry. I renounced leadership positions in producer organizations, removed sales lists from alpaca sales sites, and discontinued consulting for other producers. This was done to protect fellow producers, avoid the perception of impropriety, and to demonstrate that I had no intent of abusing my stations for the advancement of this project. However, I have no illusions that these efforts had somehow made my examination more objective. I am biased in favor of alpacas, the alpaca lifestyle, breeding enthusiasts, fiber producers, the alpaca community and the alpaca industry.

CHAPTER 5: DATA

Overview of the Dataset

Eighty-seven producers¹⁶ were identified as having one or more of the mini-theme traits identified by the coding system in the “about us,” “farm info,” “additional info” or “farm store” sections of three alpaca sales websites. Of this population of producers, 60 were located in Missouri and 27 were located in Kansas. Twelve producers were involved in all three websites, 30 producers were involved in two of these websites, and the remaining 45 producers used only one website. Data was coded based on 62 producer sites from Alpaca Nation, 45 sites from Open Herd, and 34 sites from Midwest Alpaca Farms. The coding of these sites resulted in identifying 503 instances of the emergent mini-themes. The average alpaca producer coded for about six mini-themes; the average producer in Kansas for 5.62 and the average producer in Missouri for 5.85.

The way alpaca producers represented themselves between the Alpaca Nation, Open Herd and Midwest Alpaca Farms websites tended to be consistent, with much of their narratives “cut and pasted” versions from one site to the next. As a result, some producers expressed the same mini-theme across all three websites. These producers seemed to have put a significant amount of thought into creating their narratives.

¹⁶ There were 101 producers on these sites, 87 had information that could be coded. The other sites were either place-holders or contained no code-able producer information.

Involvement in producer organizations can be an important aspect of alpaca ownership, but this study population was not limited to those belonging to the MOPACA regional organization. Overall, 52 of the 87 study population that had pages on the Alpaca Nation, Open Herd and/or Midwest Alpaca Farms websites were also MOPACA members. Conversely, of the 81 MOPACA members in the States of Missouri and Kansas, 25 had no Alpaca Nation, Open Herd or Midwest Alpaca Farms website presence.

There are common reasons for alpaca owners to avoid participation in the alpaca sales websites. They may not have any animals or products for sale, or may choose an alternative marketing strategy. These producers still have incentives to be involved in regional producer organizations; they serve important educational, lobbying, large event and social functions as well.

Altogether, 126 producers were identified in Missouri and Kansas using a variety of internet resources. Of the 39 producers for which there were no entries in this study's dataset, fourteen had "place marker" web pages that contained little or no information about themselves, while the remainder had no presence on the three source alpaca sales websites. Of the latter, three were identified as large alpaca producers whose marketing strategies do not include utilizing the alpaca sales websites; they do, however, maintain elaborate private websites, have strong industry involvement, and a well developed customer base. These three producers constitute significant outliers worthy of examination as a subset of the larger producer population. However, to have coded their personal

websites as part of the dataset would have skewed the dataset in an unacceptable manner. Thus, these outliers remain unconsidered in this study.

Raw dataset of mini-theme coding with georeference to Beale code

When a producer “coded” for a “mini-theme” the variable was given a value of “1” rather than “0” in the spreadsheet (Tables 5.1, 5.2 & 5.3). These tables can be interpreted using the coding key from Figure 4.1. The column once occupying the “F” column in the dataset’s spreadsheet contained the name of the producer’s business, which has been removed to maintain anonymity. The first five columns in tables 5.1 through 5.3 are the “FID” which is the identification number assigned to each producer, the “URCC” is the Urban – Rural Continuum Code also known as the Beale code assigned to each producer, “MW” is whether the producer was coded from the Midwest Alpacas Farms website, “OH” indicates whether the producer was coded from the Open Herd website, “AN” indicates whether the producer was coded from the Alpaca Nation website, and the fields “G” through “AF” correspond with the twenty-six mini-themes, as shown in the following summary of the coding key (Figure 5.1) that was originally shown in Figure 4.1 .

Figure 5.1: Summary of the mini-theme coding key

G = exactly the word “lifestyle” employed
H = specifically “country / farm living” / working in “nature”
I = specifically “family”
J = specifically “retirement” or plan to “retire”
K = specifically “religion / god” or religious wording such as “God bless”
L = specifically “alpaca community”
M = initial experience; “fell in love with alpacas” or “enchanted”
N = ownership experience, “joy” or “love” of alpacas / the alpaca “dream” or “adventure”
O = “investment” or “profit” motive
P = specifically “tax benefits”
Q = “potential / strength of industry”
R = LLC in name or clear “business” attitude / emphasis?
S = animal focused? [Health care / nutrition, boarding, breeding, handling / showing]
T = offer other alpaca related services, not list as “animal focus”
U = fiber focused? [Fiber utilization, improved characteristics, processing, vertical production]
V = sell alpaca products or improved fiber (not just raw fiber)?
W = quality of stock exceptional, specifically mentioned with details; or “great genetics”
X = quality of fleece exceptional, specifically mentioned with details
Y = specific bloodlines; particular animal named or specific source farm or co-op named
Z = award winning animals
AA = show attendance mentioned
AB = facility or major property modifications for alpacas
AC = alpaca experience, or making a point to stress number of years in the business
AD = customer support after the sale
AE = industry involvement indicated by stating organization memberships
AF = reasonable pricing or excellent value stressed

Table 5.1: Coding data entries FID #0-28

FID	URCC	MW	OH	AN	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF			
0	3				1		1					1		1		1			1			1	1	1		1		1					
1	1				1	1			1									1			1			1					1		1		
2	8	1	1															1															
3	4		1														1																
4	3		1	1	1											1		1				1		1					1				
5	3		1	1	1											1		1						1			1						
6	1		1	1	1							1					1				1			1					1				
7	7		1	1	1	1						1				1		1			1			1			1			1			
8	3				1							1									1										1		
9	3				1													1															
10	1		1	1									1									1	1	1						1			
11	8		1	1												1					1								1				
12	3		1	1	1			1										1			1								1				
13	1		1	1	1	1		1					1			1		1			1		1	1			1		1				
14	1				1																1						1						
15	7				1																												
16	1		1					1									1																
17	1		1	1				1					1			1					1		1				1		1		1		
18	1		1										1										1										
19	3				1																1												
20	1				1								1																				
21	8				1									1							1		1	1			1		1				
22	9				1							1						1			1		1	1						1			
23	2				1	1						1									1												
24	1				1	1						1																	1		1		
25	1				1	1															1		1	1				1		1			
26	1				1																1												
27	1				1												1				1		1							1		1	
28	6				1							1									1		1					1		1		1	

Table 5.2: Coding data entries FID #29-57

FID	URCC	MW	OH	AN	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	
29	3				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1		1	1	1		1	1	1				1		1	
30	6	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
31	6	1																1													
32	6	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1				1	1			
33	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
34	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1									1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1		
35	1	1					1		1				1																		
36	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1								1		1			1		1	1							
37	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1				1	1	
38	7				1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
39	1				1	1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1						
40	6	1																1													
41	6				1	1																									1
42	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1								1										
43	6	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
44	1	1																													
45	1				1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
46	9				1	1	1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
47	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
48	2				1	1						1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1											
49	1				1	1																									1
50	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1								1	1	1	
51	3				1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1									1	1	1
52	7				1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1								1	1	1	1
53	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1						1													1	1	1	1	1
54	1				1	1														1											
55	6				1	1																									
56	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1								1	1	1	1	1											
57	3				1	1																									1

Table 5.3: Coding data entries FID #58-86

FID	URCC	MW	OH	AN	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF		
58	1				1	1																	1									
59	9				1			1									1							1								
60	3	1	1														1															
61	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1						1	1	1	1			1		1	1	1	1			
62	3				1												1						1									
63	3				1	1	1	1			1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1		1					1	
64	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1				1		1	1	1	1			1		1					1	
65	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1										1		1		1	1	1	1		
66	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1						1	1	1	1			1		1					1	
67	9				1	1	1	1				1		1	1		1				1										1	
68	5				1	1	1	1				1								1											1	
69	6	1	1	1	1	1	1					1								1											1	
70	9				1	1	1					1						1													1	
71	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1											1								1	
72	2				1	1	1																								1	
73	4				1	1	1																								1	
74	2				1	1	1							1													1				1	
75	7	1	1	1	1	1	1																		1		1				1	
76	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1												1		1		1	1	1	1	
77	7				1	1	1					1			1									1		1		1	1	1	1	
78	1				1	1	1					1												1		1		1	1	1	1	
79	3				1	1	1					1											1		1		1				1	
80	1				1	1	1																								1	
81	1	1	1	1	1	1	1																				1	1	1	1	1	
82	7				1	1	1						1													1	1	1	1	1	1	
83	2				1	1	1																								1	1
84	6	1	1	1	1	1	1					1												1		1					1	
85	2				1	1	1																								1	1
86	6				1	1	1																								1	1

Coded Data Application

While developing the coding system, some interesting cultural indicators emerged that might be interesting in a state to state comparative study. For instance, it was discovered that alpaca producers tended to label themselves in three particular ways; as a “Farm,” as a “Ranch,” or as a chosen name plus “Alpacas.” Producers in Kansas preferred to label themselves a “Farm,” producers in Oklahoma preferred to label themselves as a “Ranch,” and producers in Missouri were evenly split between labeling themselves as either a “Farm” or a “Ranch.” A consistent portion of owners from each state labeled their business with a chosen name plus the more neutral term, “Alpacas.” This trend seems to correlate with each state’s rural identification of Kansans as “Farmers” and Oklahomans as “Ranchers.” The state of Missouri was evenly split, with roughly the northern half of the state being prime farm land, and the southern half of the state being hilly and more suited to ranching.

Although a state to state comparison was an interesting possibility, a study that sought to delve into producers’ attitudes over the urban to rural continuum was chosen so as to provide a greater contribution to the contemporary discussion of agriculture. In order to have some reference data to determine whether producers’ attitudes varied geographically, I linked a well-recognized urban to rural index to my dataset; the USDA Economic Research Services’ Urban – Rural Continuum Codes.

CHAPTER 6: RESULTS

Non-georeferenced Coding Results

Each mini-theme has a different essence. These mini-themes, in different measures and combinations, comprise the flavor of each narrative. A member of the alpaca community can read another producer’s narrative and get a fairly good idea of the *terroir*¹⁷ of that particular alpaca operation and ‘where they are coming from.’ Although each approach to the alpaca endeavor is distinctive, these fine distinctions may only be apparent to other alpaca producers – much like the distinctiveness of a particular vintage of wine is lost on the average consumer. Nine of the twenty-six mini-themes were present in 25% or more of the study population’s narratives. Each of these nine factors are ranked, summarized, and percentage of study population coding for the mini-them shown in Table 6.1. These mini-themes are discussed in detail below.

Table 6.1: the most common mini-themes encountered during coding

Rank	Description of the mini-theme	Overall
#1	<u>Bloodlines</u> : producer cited specific ancestor alpacas by name, or specific livestock sources in South America.	43%
#2	<u>Customer Support</u> : producer specifically called attention to enhanced customer support after the sale of an alpaca to a customer.	41%
#3	<u>Ownership Experience</u> : producer cited the “joy” or “love” of alpacas, a	38%

¹⁷ *Terroir* is a term used in viticulture. *Terroir* is the distinctiveness given to a wine by the maker, the grapes, manner of processing, even the soil from which the grapes were grown. It is borrowed from French, where it literally translates as “soil.”

	“passion” for alpacas, or the alpaca “dream” or “adventure.”	
#4	<u>Alpaca Products</u> : producer made clear that they add value to fiber, make alpaca products, or sell items from their or co-op alpaca fiber.	33%
#5	<u>Quality Stock</u> : producer emphasized the quality of their stock beyond stating the standard ‘good confirmation.’	32%
#5	<u>Quality Fleece</u> : producer emphasized the quality of their stock’s fleece beyond the standard ‘fine’, ‘dense’ and ‘crimpy.’	32%
#7	<u>Animal Focused</u> : producer emphasized a focus on animal care, such as diet and nutrition, birthing and breeding services, or show handling.	31%
#8	<u>Family</u> : producer characterized alpacas as a family-oriented activity.	25%
#8	<u>Lifestyle</u> : producer used the specific term “lifestyle.”	25%

Bloodlines

The alpaca industry of the last quarter century has concentrated on the consistent breeding of increasingly more desirable alpacas within each subsequent generation. To do so requires specialized knowledge of which alpacas will have the greatest propensity to produce the sought after results and this understanding is referred to within the alpaca industry as a large part of knowing your “bloodlines.” This is the “bread and butter” of alpaca producer conversations, so it is no surprise that bloodlines are the most commonly discussed mini-theme in producer’s narratives.

Imported alpacas were selected for their outstanding characteristics and breeding potential. Many of the imported males, called herd sires, proved this

potential and have become legendary in the alpaca industry. These herd sires have become immortal in the alpaca breeding business by becoming synonymous with particular desirable traits of an alpaca. Along with the name of these infamous sites, the moniker “bloodlines” is added.

In the parlance of alpaca-speak, a producer might state “we’re breeding a Caligula-Augusto line,” which means that the producer is breeding the descendants of two famous herdsires named Caligula and Augusto. The producer is indicating their intent to produce alpacas with the positive traits of both bloodlines. Many alpaca producers are familiar with the traits of these two males, and thus have some understanding of what the producer is trying to achieve. Members of the alpaca community often talk about bloodlines to each other in a manner that would clearly identify them as someone “in” the alpaca community.

Certain bloodlines are perceived, and may in fact have, a genetic tendency towards manifesting desired traits in their offspring. This results in a livestock market where the perception or implied value of an alpaca may be increased purely on the basis of ancestry; perhaps even despite the directly observable fleece characteristics of the alpaca. As a result, stating the ancestors of a personal herd of alpacas can be status signaling to others in the alpaca community because some bloodlines are highly desirable, rare or otherwise difficult to obtain. These bloodlines are well-known to producers due to the ample marketing and promotion of specific herd sires in trade publications. For example, the national producers’ organization has an award-winning publication

called *Alpacas Magazine* that comes out in three issues per year; the first issue of the year is the “Herd Sire special edition.”¹⁸ The herd sires in this annual edition are promoted on the basis of fiber characteristics, alpaca show awards, and their bloodlines.

Stating one’s bloodlines is a way to communicate breeding objectives to others in the alpaca industry. For instance, a producer might state that they have “Silverado,” “Royal Incan Legend,” “Dom Timbo,” “Rayo del Sol,” “Luciano” and “Macusani” bloodlines. Among alpaca producers, this would clearly signal that the producer is primarily interested in producing grey alpacas. Within the larger alpaca community, those producers that consistently try to breed for grey alpacas identify themselves as a sub-community of “grey breeders” and create online communities for discussing grey alpaca breeding issues.¹⁹ This kind of peer group within the larger community is often the basis upon which both friendships and business transactions develop between producers. Bloodlines are key aspects of the producer’s identity in the alpaca community.²⁰

Customer Support

A common statement among alpaca producer narratives is something to the effect of, “what distinguishes us is our exceptional customer support.” With 41% of producers claiming this or something similar, it may be reasonable to say

¹⁸ “Alpacas Magazine,” AOBA website, accessed March 2011, <http://www.alpacainfo.com/magazine/index.asp>

¹⁹ GreyAlpacaCentral.com is an example of sub-community of alpaca producers that are interested in particular bloodlines.

²⁰ McMullen, O’Shannessy and Saitone all refer to this aspect of alpaca ownership and breeding in their papers. I am more persuaded by the passionate consumerism of McMullen, rather than the irrational investment argument of Saitone, and tend towards believing O’Shannessy’s points about community.

that exceptional customer service is expected in the alpaca industry. Narratives include warmly illustrated open-ended invitations for “anyone to stop by, have a beverage and talk alpacas.” These often include guarantees of around-the-clock support for customers with alpaca issues. In several observations, producers claim a willingness to take a “call in the middle of the night” or some variation on that theme. Helping educate the customer in all aspects of the alpaca industry is another common pledge of customer service. In their narratives, producers frequently state when selling an animal, they are “making new friends” or inviting the customer to become part of “our alpaca family.”

The cultivation of a relationship during the sale of an alpaca is expected. Producers often make it clear in their narrative that they desire people to come and have an alpaca experience before deciding if they want to buy. A visit to an alpaca farm might be a customer’s first exposure to the culture of the alpaca community. This is the manner in which a producer can reveal the *je ne sais quoi* of the alpaca lifestyle without requiring ownership as a prerequisite.

In expressing a willingness to guide people new to the industry, and promising “support beyond the sale,” producers are also representing that they are well-established, long-lasting members of the alpaca community. It reassures other established producers that the producer is a stable partner in a transaction.

The Ownership Experience

Producers made varied statements regarding their experience as alpaca owners. Half a dozen of these statements were frequently recurring and similar in their reverence of alpacas. The “joy of alpacas” and the “love of alpacas” was an often stated motivation for raising alpacas. “Living the alpaca dream” or “embarking on the alpaca adventure” was common and might be restated as “once upon a time we were thinking about it, and now we are doing it.” Some producers professed a “passion for” or were “passionate about” alpacas. This mini-theme was a conglomeration of the statements that were particularly in regards to the producer’s feelings towards their day-to-day experience with alpacas.

Alpaca Products

Keeping in mind that the alpaca sales web sites are primarily centered on the promotion of animals and the producers selling them, products are somewhat of an afterthought. Yet, many producers make a point of letting people know that they are making use of their alpaca fiber. As a result, this factor made its way into the code as a mini-theme due to producers who highlighted their handmade works, products they had commissioned, products that had been made from their own fiber by a mini-mill, or products that had been acquired by their participation in a cooperative. This mini-theme was coded only for producers who were selling products made from their own harvested fiber or from cooperative fiber.

Quality Stock

The minimum required to trigger coding of this mini-theme was a statement regarding “great genetics” when nothing about specific bloodlines was mentioned, or when something in addition to “good confirmation”²¹ was stated. Producers may discuss in great length their ideas about how the livestock should physically appear. A producer might state that “what we are going for is...”, and then list off traits such as a “round head,” “straight back,” “posty legs,” “correct bite,” “strong bone structure,” “great balance,” or “good spring of rib,” which all speak to very different aspects of an alpaca. Although quite varied, these statements indicate that the producer has some idea of what an alpaca should look like underneath its fleece.

Quality Fleece

It is almost ubiquitous that producers will say “we are breeding for fine, dense, crimped fleeces,” so to be coded for this mini-theme, the producer had to state something more specific. Sometimes their statements would tie into other factors, such as a discussion about how they were trying to use certain bloodlines to create fleeces with “long staple length,” or how they are using special formulated diets to make the fleece “bright.” Other statements stood alone, such as “great handle,” “high frequency crimp,” and “cool, buttery texture.” While these objectives varied, they signaled that the producer had some idea of what the fleece of the alpaca should look like once it is shorn off the animal.

²¹ Confirmation in alpaca-speak is in reference to body structure. Good confirmation indicates an animal that has proper proportions and has no defect of confirmation that might be a heritage trait.

Animal Focused

Producers that exhibited this mini-theme were distinguishing themselves in the manner in which they care for their alpacas. The most common version of this were producers that discussed spending a lot of time working with the animals, teaching them to lead on a halter, and getting them accustomed to being with people and being handled. Potential customers, especially new alpaca owners, appreciate a well-trained animal and so this is a popular objective. Other producers signal their focus on animals in different ways, such as bringing attention to an advanced nutrition program, or detailing the health and preventive care that their animals receive.

Family

Compared to many other livestock choices, alpacas are easily handled and tend to be calm under circumstances that might spook other large animals. This contributes to a common belief that alpacas are “kid friendly” and “elderly friendly.” Producers often signal this point by discussing how their children or elderly family members interact with their alpacas. In other cases, the producer makes it clear that their alpaca enterprise is entirely focused on providing a family experience. In either case, these producers are highlighting that the alpaca lifestyle can be a family-oriented endeavor.

Lifestyle

This was the simplest of all the mini-themes to code as it was only counted if the producer used the exact word “lifestyle.” So many producers refer

to the “alpaca lifestyle” that most of the coded instances came from that specific phrase, while others made similar statements, such as “having alpacas has allowed us to have a new lifestyle.”

Initial Coding Results Concluded

All twenty-six mini-themes were found present in both the Missouri and Kansas study populations. Out of all of these, nine mini-themes accounted for over half of coding instances. Due to the strength of these nine, prior to geographic analysis the remaining seventeen mini-themes seemed insignificant. However, interesting variations did appear when the dataset was georeferenced, tied to Rural – Urban Continuum Codes, re-sorted and re-analyzed for variances.

Georeferenced Coding Results

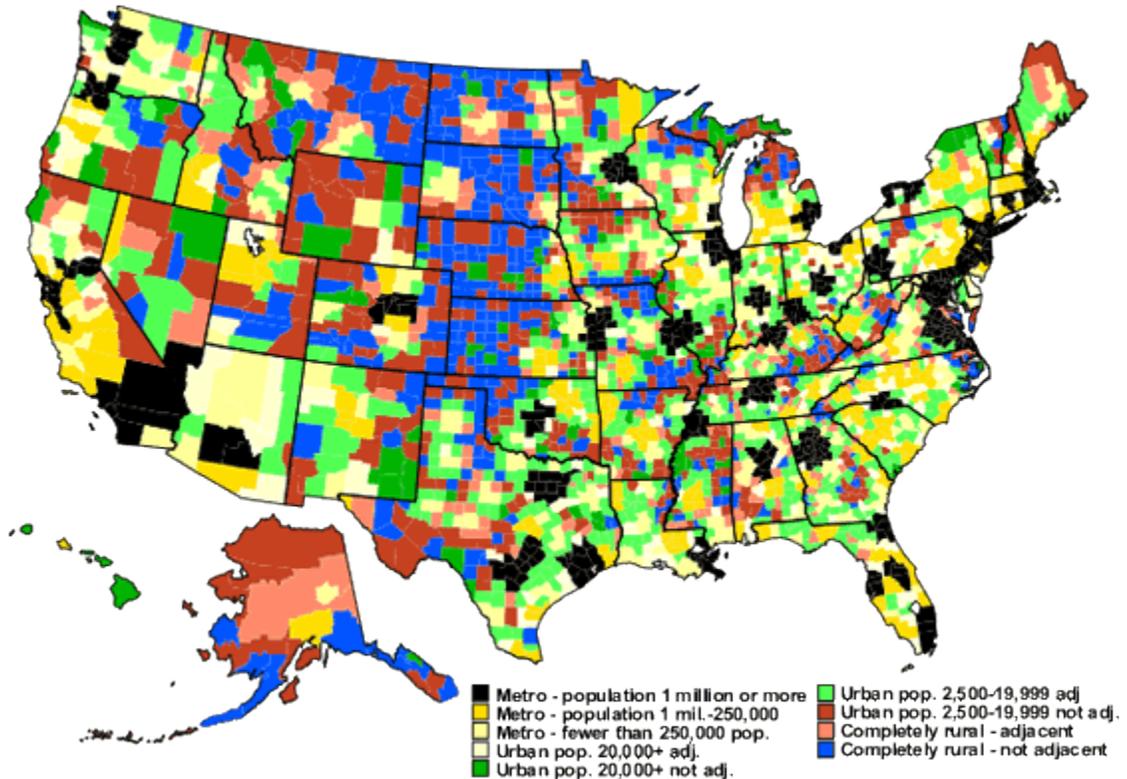
The USDA’s Rural – Urban Continuum Codes, or Beale codes²², categorizes counties based on population and proximity to highly urbanized areas, among other factors. The map in Figure 6.1 illustrates the distribution of the Beale codes across the 3,141 counties of the United States. Note that the states of Missouri and Kansas, unlike many other states, contain several counties on the two extremes of the Beale Codes; these are code 9, “completely rural – not adjacent” shown in blue, and code 1, “metro – population 1 million or more” shown in black. Alpaca producers appeared in counties of each Beale code category in Kansas and Missouri. This distribution is some indication that

²² Additional information about Beale Codes is available at www.ers.usda.gov.

attaching this study’s coding dataset to Beale codes should result in some meaningful geographic analysis.

Figure 6.1: USDA map of Beale codes by county across the United States

Rural-urban continuum codes, 2003



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

In Table 4.2, the Beale codes are organized by their descriptions of “adjacency,” such that non-metropolitan counties are distinguished by their adjacency or non-adjacency to metropolitan counties. In so doing, the codes become a representation of proximity to highly urbanized areas. These distinctions are incorporated into the Beale codes.

It should be noted that using an “urban – rural continuum as a means of defining differing degrees of rurality” is considered by some researchers to be

inherently flawed because there is no single space that can be referred to as “countryside” or “rural” and that “one area can occupy different places on several continua” (Sharpley 2004). Not only do I accept the premise of these arguments, I embrace them as a meaningful aspect of this project. An examination of attitudes across a contrived continuum is most interesting in this case because of these discrepancies that are created by producers’ behavior. It is in fact because people are creating these locations with “rural” and “countryside” meanings in places that are ‘out of place’ that is fascinating. Using the Beale codes to create “degrees of rurality” is precisely the point of ordering them as I do in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Rural – Urban Continuum Codes organized by adjacency

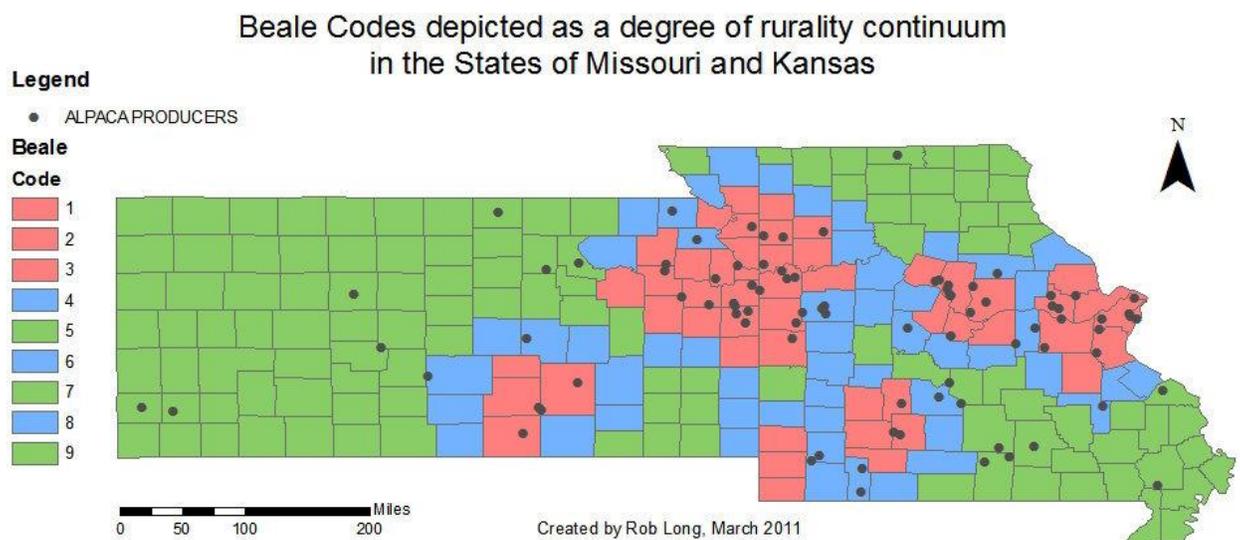
Category of Code	Abbreviated Name	Code	Population
Counties in Metropolitan Areas	“Metro”	1	1 million or more
		2	250,000 to 1 million
		3	Fewer than 250,000
Non-Metropolitan Counties Adjacent to Metropolitan Areas	“Rural”	4	Urban population of 20,000 or more
		6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999
		8	Less than 2,500 urban population
Non-Metropolitan Counties Non-Adjacent to Metropolitan Areas	“Deep Rural”	5	Urban population of 20,000 or more
		7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999
		9	Less than 2,500 urban population

Source information at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/ruralurbcon/>

Figure 6.2 illustrates the Beale codes by their category of adjacency. Note that in Missouri and Kansas only four of the “metro” counties touch the “deep rural” counties. For the most part, clusters of metro counties are surrounded by

“rural” counties, which themselves are surrounded by “deep rural” counties. The result is the appearance of concentric rings from the most metropolitan to least metropolitan areas, reminiscent of a depiction of Christaller’s Central Place Theory.²³ Figure 6.2 also contains a symbol to represent each producer’s location. Fifty-three producers are located in metro areas, nineteen are located in rural areas, and fifteen are located in deep rural areas.

Figure 6.2: Metro, Rural and Deep Rural Continuum in Missouri and Kansas



When the coded mini-theme dataset was re-sorted by Beale code and placed in the associated metro, rural and deep rural category, some mini-theme distinctions began to appear. Table 6.3 shows the percentage of producers in each category that exhibit the top nine mini-themes shown in Table 6.1, compared to the study population as a whole.

²³ Walter Christaller was an early-20th century geographer who modeled urban settlements as central places that service outlying areas following a predictable pattern, which was geometric in nature.

The only mini-theme consistent across the metro – rural – deep rural continuum was producers using the specific term “lifestyle.” The remaining eight factors showed a significant amount of variation.

Table 6.3: producers' mini-theme data categorized into three geographic regions

	Overall	Metro	Rural	Deep Rural	Largest percent difference
Bloodlines #1	43%	+7%	-16%	-11%	18%
Customer Support #2	41%	0%	+6%	-15%	21%
Joy / Love / Dream #3	38%	-6%	+4%	+4%	10%
Alpaca Products #4	33%	-1%	+9%	-12%	21%
Quality Stock #5	32%	+4%	-11%	-6%	15%
Quality Fleece #5	32%	+4%	-6%	-11%	15%
Animal Focused #7	31%	-5%	+6%	+1%	11%
Family #8	25%	-1%	-9%	+6%	15%
Lifestyle #8	25%	-1%	1%	1%	2%

Once the geographical distribution was accounted for, not only did distinctions appear concerning the most frequently occurring factors, but some of the less frequently occurring factors showed strong rural or urban tendencies.²⁴ Enough factors varied across the rural – urban continuum so that some characterizations could be made about these different groups of producers. Please note that these are broad generalizations, though generalizations that are

²⁴ To review these variations, please consult the full dataset in the addendum.

supported by the data. Each alpaca producer still represents a unique approach to the alpaca endeavor, but some aspects seem more common among rural producers than urban ones, and vice versa.

What differentiates “metro” producers as a group?

These alpaca producers strongly promote the bloodlines of their alpacas. They often discuss in detail the positive fleece characteristics their animals possess. They will frequently state that their livestock are of high-quality. This combination is an indication of their tendency to exalt the exceptional and outstanding characteristics of their alpacas in general. Producers within this geographic group are also the most likely to highlight that they have reasonable prices. Metropolitan producers are less likely to promote a strong focus on animal care than either of their rural counterparts.

What differentiates “rural” producers as a group?

These producers are the biggest proponents of alpaca products. They are more likely to highlight their experience with alpacas and are most likely to offer additional alpaca services. Most of the people who mention retirement fall into this geographic category. These producers appear to be decidedly less likely to have a clear business focus than either their urban or more rural counterparts, yet have a clear tendency to emphasize customer service. They are also the least likely group to discuss alpacas as a family activity or exalt the virtues of country living and working outdoors. By far, this group was the least likely to discuss their involvement with alpaca organizations.

What differentiates “deep rural” producers as a group?

By far, these producers are the least likely to emphasize customer support as a differentiating factor of their alpaca endeavor, to offer additional alpaca services or alpaca products, or mention the alpaca community or enjoying attending alpaca shows. Producers in these geographic regions were the most likely to have a distinct business focus, but were least likely to discuss the strength of the alpaca industry. Although not the primary defining characteristic of the entire group, these producers were four times more likely to mention religion or god than either of the other geographic groups. They were also the group most likely to talk about alpacas as a family activity.

Themes exhibited by producers living in the most highly urban locations

By far the largest segment of the study population was producers in Beale code 1, with thirty-one producers. These producers in the most highly urbanized areas were likely to code differently for certain mini-themes than other producers (Table 6.5).

Producers living in the most highly urbanized locations were somewhat more likely to invoke the word “lifestyle” and were tremendously more likely to talk about the joy of alpacas, their love of alpacas, or living the alpaca dream than other metro producers. They were also much more likely to mention their involvement with alpaca organizations and to make mention of their experience with alpacas than their metro counterparts. Over half of the urban producers made a point of discussing exceptional customer service; much more so than

other metro producers. Lastly, urban producers were the most frequent of all producers to highlight the bloodlines of their alpacas and the most likely to tout the advanced qualities of their animal's fleeces.

Table 6.4: Percentage of variability of mini-theme by Beale code

	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF
Overall	25%	22%	25%	15%	7%	6%	14%	38%	15%	6%	16%	21%	31%	23%	17%	33%	32%	32%	43%	21%	17%	18%	21%	41%	23%	16%
Rank #	8	12	8	21	24	25	23	3	21	25	19	13	7	10	17	4	5	5	1	13	17	16	13	2	10	19
Code 1	29%	23%	23%	10%	3%	6%	3%	45%	16%	3%	16%	23%	23%	23%	13%	32%	39%	42%	52%	23%	19%	16%	26%	52%	35%	26%
31	4%	1%	-3%	-5%	-4%	1%	-11%	7%	1%	-3%	0%	2%	-8%	0%	-4%	-1%	7%	10%	9%	2%	2%	-2%	5%	10%	12%	10%
Code 2	14%	29%	29%	29%	0%	0%	14%	14%	14%	0%	14%	29%	14%	29%	14%	14%	29%	14%	43%	29%	29%	0%	14%	0%	14%	0%
7	-11%	7%	3%	14%	-7%	-6%	0%	-24%	-1%	-6%	-2%	8%	-17%	6%	-3%	-19%	-4%	-18%	0%	8%	11%	-18%	-6%	-41%	-9%	-16%
Code 3	20%	20%	27%	7%	0%	7%	33%	13%	13%	7%	13%	27%	40%	27%	20%	40%	33%	33%	47%	20%	7%	20%	7%	40%	13%	27%
15	-5%	-2%	1%	-8%	-7%	1%	20%	-25%	-2%	1%	-3%	6%	9%	4%	3%	7%	1%	1%	4%	-1%	-11%	2%	-14%	-1%	0%	11%
Code 4	20%	0%	20%	40%	20%	0%	0%	40%	20%	0%	0%	0%	60%	20%	0%	60%	20%	20%	60%	0%	20%	20%	20%	40%	20%	0%
5	-5%	-22%	-5%	25%	13%	-6%	-14%	2%	5%	-6%	-16%	-21%	29%	-3%	-17%	27%	-12%	-12%	17%	-21%	3%	2%	-1%	-1%	-3%	-16%
Code 5	0%	0%	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%	33%	33%	0%	33%	0%	0%	0%	33%	33%	67%	33%	0%
3	-25%	-22%	41%	18%	-7%	-6%	-14%	-5%	-15%	-6%	-16%	13%	-31%	-23%	16%	0%	-32%	1%	-43%	-21%	-17%	15%	13%	25%	10%	-16%
Code 6	36%	27%	18%	18%	0%	18%	27%	55%	0%	9%	27%	0%	27%	45%	18%	36%	18%	27%	18%	18%	18%	18%	36%	45%	0%	9%
11	11%	5%	-7%	3%	-7%	12%	13%	17%	-15%	3%	11%	-21%	-4%	22%	1%	3%	-14%	-5%	-24%	-3%	1%	0%	16%	4%	-23%	-7%
Code 7	43%	43%	14%	14%	29%	0%	14%	71%	14%	14%	14%	29%	43%	0%	14%	43%	43%	29%	57%	29%	29%	43%	29%	14%	29%	14%
7	18%	21%	-11%	-1%	22%	-6%	0%	33%	-1%	9%	-2%	8%	12%	-23%	-3%	10%	11%	-4%	15%	8%	11%	24%	8%	-27%	6%	-2%
Code 8	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%	33%	0%	33%	33%	67%	33%	33%	33%	0%	33%	33%	0%	0%	67%	0%	0%
3	-25%	-23%	-25%	-11%	-2%	-6%	-13%	-32%	18%	-4%	18%	-25%	7%	9%	52%	1%	-3%	-3%	-49%	11%	16%	-15%	-19%	25%	-26%	-23%
Code 9	20%	20%	60%	20%	40%	0%	20%	40%	40%	20%	20%	40%	60%	0%	20%	0%	40%	20%	40%	20%	0%	20%	0%	40%	40%	0%
5	-5%	-2%	35%	5%	33%	-6%	6%	2%	25%	14%	4%	19%	29%	-23%	3%	-33%	8%	-12%	-3%	-1%	-17%	2%	-21%	-1%	17%	-16%

Table 6.5: Percentage of variability of mini-theme by Beale code groups

	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF
Overall	25%	22%	25%	15%	7%	6%	14%	38%	15%	6%	16%	21%	31%	23%	17%	33%	32%	32%	43%	21%	17%	18%	21%	41%	23%	16%
Rank #	8	12	8	21	24	25	23	3	21	25	19	13	7	10	17	4	5	5	1	13	17	16	13	2	10	19
Metro	25%	23%	25%	11%	2%	6%	13%	32%	15%	4%	15%	25%	26%	25%	15%	32%	36%	36%	49%	23%	17%	15%	19%	42%	26%	23%
	-1%	1%	-1%	-4%	-5%	0%	-1%	-6%	0%	-2%	-1%	4%	-5%	2%	-2%	-1%	4%	4%	7%	2%	0%	-3%	-2%	0%	3%	7%
Rural	26%	16%	16%	21%	5%	11%	16%	42%	11%	5%	21%	0%	37%	37%	21%	42%	21%	26%	26%	16%	21%	16%	26%	47%	5%	5%
	1%	-6%	-9%	6%	-2%	5%	2%	4%	-4%	0%	5%	-21%	6%	14%	4%	9%	-11%	-6%	-16%	-5%	4%	-3%	6%	6%	-18%	-11%
Deep Rural	21%	21%	32%	16%	21%	0%	11%	42%	16%	11%	11%	26%	32%	0%	16%	21%	26%	21%	32%	16%	11%	26%	16%	26%	26%	5%
	-4%	-1%	6%	1%	14%	-6%	-3%	4%	1%	5%	-6%	6%	1%	-23%	-1%	-12%	-6%	-11%	-11%	-5%	-7%	8%	-5%	-15%	3%	-11%
All Rural	26%	21%	26%	21%	15%	6%	15%	47%	15%	9%	18%	15%	38%	21%	21%	35%	26%	26%	32%	18%	18%	24%	24%	41%	18%	6%
	1%	-1%	1%	6%	8%	0%	1%	9%	0%	3%	2%	-6%	7%	-2%	3%	2%	-6%	-6%	-10%	-3%	0%	5%	3%	0%	-5%	-10%
Code 1	29%	23%	23%	10%	3%	6%	3%	45%	16%	3%	16%	23%	23%	23%	13%	32%	39%	42%	52%	23%	19%	16%	26%	52%	35%	26%
	31	4%	1%	-3%	-5%	-4%	1%	-11%	7%	1%	-3%	0%	2%	-8%	0%	-4%	-1%	7%	10%	9%	2%	-2%	5%	10%	12%	10%
Code 2+3	18%	23%	27%	14%	0%	5%	27%	14%	14%	5%	14%	27%	32%	27%	18%	32%	32%	27%	45%	23%	14%	14%	9%	27%	14%	18%
	22	-7%	1%	2%	-1%	-7%	-1%	13%	-24%	-1%	-1%	-2%	6%	1%	4%	1%	-1%	0%	-5%	2%	-3%	-4%	-12%	-14%	-9%	2%

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

Since the “Green Revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s, non-diverse Fordist production methods of agriculture have enabled the Earth’s human population to grow exponentially for a half century. It would seem that ‘what the world needs now’ is even more productive agricultural systems; lest the whole “system” comes crashing down as entire human populations starve to death. Yet the trend is against productivist agricultural methods. Popular consumer movements promoting “free range” livestock, abandonment of growth hormone use in favor of “organically grown,” and a preference for “locally produced” and “family owned.” Yarwood and Evans suggest that, “three central characteristics of this shift in agrarian priorities away from food production have been evident as ‘pluriactivity’, a desire for more environmentally friendly farming and consumer concern over food quality” (2000).

As a sign of these shifting agricultural priorities, people have adopted practices and invented lifestyles that strive to address concerns and realize post-modernist ideals in practice. These activities vary from the non-traditional, such as agro-tourism, rare and exotic species keeping, small scale organic and “hobby” farming, to very traditional activities such as agriculturally based cottage industry, small scale diversified farming, and the keeping of locally significant historical livestock species. These are among the examples used when Yarwood & Evans describe the “post-productivist countryside.” Many of the people engaging in these new and revised versions of agriculture are in pursuit of an “idealized rural lifestyle” (2000).

Agriculture in America has been bifurcating. According to the USDA's Agricultural Census of 2007, only about 1 million of the United States' 2.2 million farms reported positive incomes from agriculture. Five-percent of farms account for 75% of agricultural production. This census reports that of farms with less than \$250,000 in sales, 36% of were classified as lifestyle or residential farms, 21% were classified as retirement farms, and 65% of those farmers have off-the-farm jobs (USDA Agricultural Census 2009).

This has been playing out in the landscape. "Certain landscapes are becoming devoid of livestock farming, others are not, becoming instead smelly ghettos of livestock and manure set well apart from more gentrified landscapes" (Carolan 2007). As people seek an 'idealized rural lifestyle,' moving out of cities to become ex-urbanites, "this 'rural gentrification' results in the creation of landscapes that often reflect middle/professional-class conceptions of countryside" (Carolan 2007). Where traditional American livestock might once have been, ex-urbanites might substitute alpacas, a relatively sanitized livestock.

In some cases, the "rural" is moving towards the urban, finding a place of acceptance in suburban regions where gardens and small orchards are not out of place. Carolan would likely agree that the reason alpacas are so often accepted in populated areas is because alpaca manure doesn't create an offensive odor and other reasons mentioned in the introduction chapter.

As post-productive hobby agriculture trends become increasingly popularized, some livestock are being permitted inside populated regions. For

example *Urban Farm* magazine's list of "urban livestock" currently includes chickens, goats, rabbits and bees (Urban Farm). Sustaining a food supply for one's own family is increasingly socially permissible, even admirable, as if a contemporary "Victory Garden." In the town of Columbia, Missouri, the city council voted to allow residents to raise as many as six hens in their backyard, which was promoted as a sufficient number to lay fresh eggs and to provide the benefit "children will receive by seeing where their food comes from" (Pointer 2010). Community supported agriculture, often simply called CSAs, are peri-urban examples of larger scale agriculture mixing with populated areas. Full-blown urban agriculture initiatives are not uncommon to large cities. Without a doubt, suburban and urbanized areas are proving to be permeable to agriculture, while the countryside is being permeated by urbanites.

These post-productivist agricultural endeavors are motivated by a variety of ideals, such as being involved in one's own food production, having an outdoor activity, obtaining fresh produce for cooking, feelings of accomplishment, and the like. These activities have economic aspects as well, such as reducing food expenses by growing food, particularly growing organic produce that is expensive to purchase, or selling a bit of produce for extra income. By regarding the production of organic fiber as substantially similar to producing organic food, it can be understood how the alpaca community ties in with these social movements. The alpaca community is embracing recent non-productivist agricultural trends. This is very apparent in the marketing campaigns of producer organizations, such as those demonstrated in Figures 1.4, 7.1 & 7.2.

Figure 7.1: The “green” fleece



(From the AOBA website’s media for use by alpaca producers, March 2011)

Alpacas and Land Use Conflicts

Most alpaca producers are farming on small acreage (AOBA Survey Report 2008). Many of these operations exist very close to other peoples’ residencies. In the case of Ohio, a state with the largest population of alpacas, conflicts about land use and community change in exurban areas has a lot to do with farming versus non-farming interests (Smith and Sharp 2005). Conflicts between neighbors that farm and those who don’t farm can result in a complicated living situation. In contemplating an agricultural endeavor, potential alpaca producers may have to consider the reaction of their neighbors.

When it comes to farming alpacas, their friendliness and their attractiveness may be large benefits, but what is perhaps more important is what alpacas are not; they are not noisy, smelly, threatening, or destructive. Understanding neighbors' concerns is an essential element to creating a positive coexistence between farming and non-farming neighbors (Kelsey and Vaserstein 2000). If for no other reason, the alpaca phenomenon may find continued growth due to their lack of negative characteristics that other forms of animal agriculture typically possess, particularly in exurban areas.

The Alpaca Micro-Culture

Alpacas have been constructed by humans to be in the landscapes in which they appear. Without the assistance of humans, there would be no alpacas in North America. Without the science of humans, there would be no knowledge that the original camelid was native to North America. In a sense, alpacas in North America satisfies the “return to form” of the “image of pre-modern nature” considered a sign of post-productivism (Lulka 2006). This, unlike the bison of Lulka’s study, is not the re-imagination of alpacas which has sustained the micro-culture of the alpaca community. Alpacas have been re-imagined in other ways by their owners; to be the focus of a lifestyle farming endeavor as well as luxurious fiber producers, exotic companions, and adorable living fluff-balls gifted by nature to be breed and perfected, as in Figure 5.2.

Figure 7.2: “Nature’s Masterpiece”

ALPACAS ARE A MASTERPIECE OF NATURE.



(From the AOBA website’s media for use by alpaca producers, March 2011)

These re-imaginings of the alpaca have come from a wide variety of people who have ‘taken the plunge’ for one reason or another. Many have been attracted by assurances that alpacas are easily raised on small acreage, or that “urban dwellers can board their alpacas at nearby farms / ranches so that they can enjoy the benefits of ownership while living in a large city or suburb” (Meet the Alpaca). Alpaca production is even being taken up by some seasoned farmers and ranchers. Prior to raising alpacas, 10% of producers report having raised crops commercially and 15% report having bred and sold commercial livestock. Of these people, 83% of producers surveyed report that they consider

their “alpaca venture” to be professional and part of a business; 24% report “working full time as an alpaca farmer” (AOBA Survey Data 2010).

My research shows regardless of who these people may be, or what their backgrounds are, there are a number of distinctions that can be made about them based as a result of where they live along the urban – rural continuum. In my results chapter, I review having found that producers living in the most urban of areas inordinately discuss their involvement in alpaca community organizations and sing about how much they love their alpacas. This same demographic of producer tends to highlight things that can be done on a computer, such as research bloodlines or reply to customer emails. Envision for a moment someone sitting in a cubicle of “corporate America” with a finger ready to hit the “boss button” while they daydream about weekend time on an alpaca farm and write self-descriptive narratives for an alpaca website? The occasional producer narrative has stated similar situation!

Looking at the group that is most remote from these highly urbanized producers, my research discovered that “deep rural” producers did not emphasize their involvement in the industry or going to alpaca shows. These people had the most matter-of-fact attitudes about alpacas, exhibiting a very business-like approach to the endeavor. Although they agreed that the “alpaca lifestyle” is nice, they did not seem as infatuated with alpacas as do their urban counterparts. This group does not try to use their statements to convince others that the alpaca industry is strong or that it has a promising future. This sounds more like someone who is more accustomed to agriculture. Instead, this group is

the most likely to talk about how much their family enjoys the alpacas – not in terminology of “love” or “joy,” but as an animal that is enjoyable. Perhaps the family enjoys alpacas over, say, the cattle or hogs they raise; this was not shown in the data, but it may be true in some of these cases. Deep rural producers, like rural producers, are more likely to discuss the care that they give to their animals, compared to those in metropolitan counties.

The producers between the deep rural counties and the metropolitan counties held some interesting distinctions from their counterparts. This was where most of the people who mentioned “retiring” into an alpaca career resided. These are producers who would most heavily emphasize the ‘come have a sweet tea on the porch’ approach to customer service. They were the most likely to discuss their extensive alpaca experience. From these accounts, it would seem like these would be the “full-time” alpaca farmers that appear in the national survey data. However, very few producers actually state that they are full-time alpaca farmers in their narratives. They may not want to emphasize how hard they work since they approach this as a lifestyle or a retirement rather than a job. Even though these producers didn’t seem to be as business-like, they tend to offer more services. It’s as if these people have the time to do anything in the alpaca industry. By far, these were the producers most involved in making alpaca fiber products.

Broadening the generalizations a bit, the most urban producers seemed like the breeding enthusiasts that are trying to make an ideal alpaca and then compete in an alpaca show with it. The rural producers seem most likely to be

the fiber industry advocates that are able to find a variety of uses for alpaca fiber. The deep rural producers seem to approach alpacas as an investment that also provides a nice family oriented activity. All groups appreciate the “alpaca lifestyle” for whatever aspect about it that they value. The alpaca micro-culture is very interesting because despite their having very different motivations to be involved, all producers are united by being involved in the alpaca lifestyle, and therefore the alpaca community.

The Alpaca Fiber Industry - Reconsidered

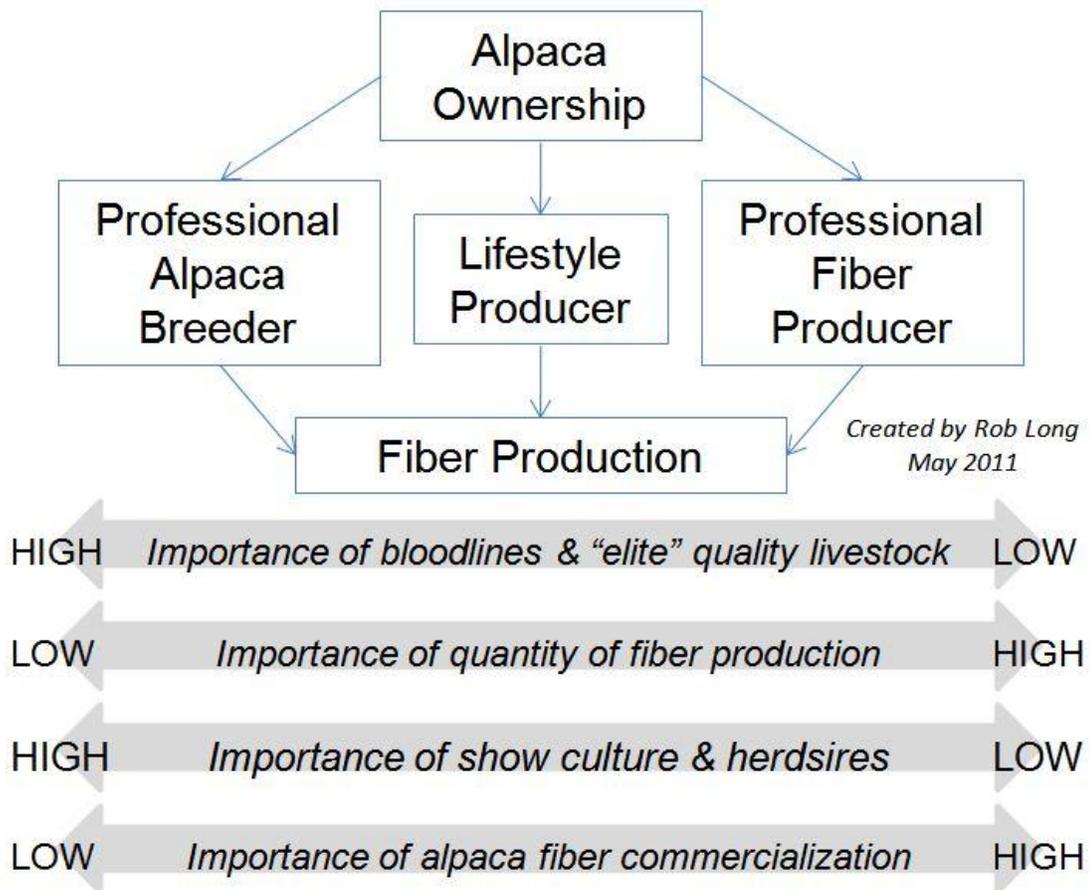
Despite all of the problems facing the alpaca fiber industry, primarily the “batching” issue discussed in the introduction chapter, interest in putting alpaca fiber into production is soaring. In my experience, producers would be embarrassed to admit that they were doing nothing with their harvested fiber. Due to the desire to use it and an interest in learning how to do so, innovation has been spreading quickly among producers.

Alpaca producers are restyling themselves as both fiber producers and product manufacturers. A group of alpaca producers in my region have pooled together to purchase equipment to make rugs, have branded their product, and discovered several venues in which to offer their product for sale. An intrepid producer in Texas has been trying to mix alpaca fiber into blue jeans, and has been marketing the idea with images of jean-wearing ladies hugging an alpaca (Paca Blue Jeans). One of the most successful endeavors to put fiber into use has been the “Alpaca Blanket Project,” which has teamed up with the famous

Pendleton Woolen Mills to produce “heirloom quality” blankets and scarves made completely from alpaca fiber (Blanket Project).

These projects and others have created much excitement among producers in the alpaca community. No matter what segment of the alpaca micro-culture a producer self-associates, it is becoming clearer that there is a viable future to the alpaca fiber industry in America.

Figure 7.3: a model of producer coexistence based on mini-themes



Alpaca breeders, lifestyle farmers and fiber producers have the common objectives of developing a fiber industry, which requires both quantity of fleece and improvements in the overall quality of the national herd. What’s interesting is

that the mini-themes identified by this study show no divisiveness in regards to how this achieved, even though business models vary tremendously from one farm to the next. Rather, all manner of participants in the alpaca industry fall somewhere along the spectrum on each issue (Figure 7.3).

Fiber production has become the central factor motivating the alpaca industry. My study showed no mutual exclusivity between “elite quality”²⁵ alpaca breeders and those who are primarily fiber producers. The “deep rural” producers (and their business-like approach) together with the “urban” producers (and their concern for breeding the best bloodlines) comprise a well-rounded group. Deep rural producers are a natural fit with urban producers who have limited space to grow their herds. Urban producers that create excess livestock, which don’t make the cut at an alpaca show, are generally perfect for fiber harvesting. Because non-show, non-auction alpacas are not falsely overvalued in the way Saitone and Sexton (2008) claim, these “fiber quality” alpacas are the kind that rural producers could turn a profit on. This makes sense from a geographic standpoint. People in the city can’t sustain the number of alpacas required for mass production of alpaca fiber, so they concentrate on quality rather than quantity. People in rural areas with access to large tracts of land can have greater numbers of alpacas and reap a larger annual fiber harvest using less expensive animals. Thus, the industry is destined to bifurcate geographically, as urban producers sell excess animals to rural producers, who then drive fiber production.

²⁵ This is a common term among alpaca breeders, which roughly refers to the top 5-10% of alpacas. An associated term is “elite fleece.” Many breeders state that their objective is to breed for an “elite fleece.”

The Future of Alpacas in America

Alpacas will continue to be reimagined as time goes by. There are examples of other reimaginings that are either in their infancy or coming of age. Some people have been training alpacas to perform as therapy animals. An alpaca that would normally have been euthanized due to a spinal injury has even had extensive therapy performed, and now tours around as a therapy animal in Missouri (Hollinshed 2010).

Although a taboo subject in polite circles within the alpaca community, there are stories of misbehaving alpacas being ‘mixed with the venison.’ Eating alpaca has been an accepted practice among Andean peoples for many millennia, after all. This contravenes one popular selling point, that the alpaca industry is a “no-kill” industry. Yet, I find myself occasionally engaged in ‘hush-hush’ discussions with other producers about whether a time will come that some alpacas will be culled rather than allowed to grow to old age. Someday, whether for profit motive, cutting overhead, adding to one’s diet, or otherwise “improving” the herd, some producer will pioneer this reimagination... and perhaps someday it will become an accepted practice in America too.²⁶

It is simply inevitable that as the national alpaca herd grows, some alpacas will become treated like any other standard livestock have been treated. When alpacas were imagined as nothing more than an exotic pet, such things would never be considered, and the animals were too valuable to even entertain

²⁶ This is not a practice I advocate.

a discussion about the matter. For better or for worse, conceptualizations of the alpaca in America are subject to ongoing reimagination.

Previous imaginations of alpacas have been optimistic, and are now seeming more plausible. Over a decade ago an enthusiastic alpaca producer wrote:

The most exciting milestone in the alpaca's future will be reached when 'critical mass' is achieved. This fusion of fiber, fashion, and finance will usher in a new golden age for these enduring and endearing little creatures. When this happens, the great wheel of history will have completed one full turn, for the alpaca – so prized in his small and hidden world 5000 years ago, will again enjoy the featured spotlight on the much bigger stage of worldwide awareness, acceptance, and applause (Davis 1995).

Whether current imaginations of alpacas can exist alongside future imaginations is an interesting question, perhaps for future research. We know that the native Andean peoples retained their reverence of alpacas despite their change in status from the bearers of the fiber of the Gods to a scourge under Spanish oppression. Although not quite so dramatic as the alpacas' historical fall from grace under Spanish swords, alpacas in America are undergoing a change from exotic pet to standard livestock. My sense is that the contemporary fascination and infatuation with the alpaca in America will continue for many decades to come.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

At what point does someone decide to become a member of the micro-culture of the alpaca community? Complicated milieus of producer's motivations are entwined. My research confirms what McMullen and O'Shaughnessy and Abel Durante and even Saitone and Sexton acknowledge – lifestyle motivations weigh heavily in the decision.

The alpaca industry has been singled out as an example of a livestock market bubble (Saitone and Sexton 2008). Prices for alpacas have dropped considerably since the economic downturn of 2008. The market for alpaca fiber is doing well. The livestock value and end-product return on investment are equalizing, so it would appear that either the “bubble” has burst, or that the alpaca industry is not the example of a bubble that has been claimed.

Alpacas will become increasingly available as their population increases and the alpaca industry continues to evolve from a focus on breeding to a greater focus on fiber production. Ownership of alpacas will expand outside of its current micro-culture to be included with other forms of diversified agriculture. It is plausible that alpacas will fit well with the conceptualizations of agriculture that value the versatility and eco-friendliness that the alpaca has to offer as a livestock. Researchers note these to be important attributes in new models of agriculture such as urban eco-villages (Ergas 2010), ongoing “back to the land” experiments of the last half century (Halfacree 2006), and even among traditional farming families who are attempting to maintain their lifestyles (Hennon and

Hildenbrand 2005). The alpaca phenomenon appears to be in step with these reimaginings of agriculture. The reimagination of alpacas will continue.

APPENDIX I:

Manufactured narrative that would code for all mini-themes

The websites that allow for the producer self-descriptive narratives from which the data were coded allowed for many hundreds of words to do so. As an experiment, I tried to combine all twenty-six mini-themes from the coding key into a single “example” narrative. All of the statements in this example were stated by producers separately, but this amalgamation is my own work done in fewer than 300 words. This is for reference only. In actuality, the producer who coded for the most number of mini-themes coded for sixteen (Table 5.2).

The alpaca business offers us a lot of benefits. From working outside on the farm in the fresh air as a family, to sharing the alpaca lifestyle with our friends and church, to us and our kids being involved with alpaca organizations, and all the friends we've made in the alpaca community – there are so many people with whom to share the joy of raising alpacas, and our love of these God-gifted creatures. From the first time we saw them, we fell in love with alpacas. Since we retired into having an alpaca business, we've enjoyed the tax benefits of having a family farm, and have felt that the investment was a good one financially. Let us help you learn how to profit from the strong aspects of the alpaca industry; there is so much potential for you to profit while enjoying the alpaca lifestyle with us.

Our farm store has alpaca products to suit your needs; they make excellent gifts. Any time of year, come by and process some fiber with us; try out some sorting, learn to needle felt, or just get your hand on raw fleece. Fiber is the future! We enjoy going to shows, where our animals have won many prizes. These ribbons prove that our goals of producing excellent softness, crimp, density and length of fleece on a well conformed animal with a beautiful head and full top knot has been achieved. No wonder, because we have some of the best bloodlines available, including Accoyo. Our dedicated alpaca facility, enhanced alpaca nutrition program, and our years of alpaca experience contribute to our ongoing success. Let us share this success with you. We offer outstanding customer support, reasonable prices, and exceptional livestock with quality fleece.

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