ESCAPE from the ZOO

BY ERIC HOFFMAN

While traditional stockmen may discuss the merits of the resurgence of the draft horse or the advantages of Brangus cattle over their Angus and Brahman parent breeds, there's a whole new crowd gathering around the old Inca standbys, llamas and alpacas. The makeup of the crowd is as untraditional as the animals themselves. And compared to the marketing dynamics that usually govern the livestock industry, the thousands and ten thousands of dollars these furry members of the camel family fetch in the marketplace is a phenomenon that may be difficult to fathom. Nevertheless, it is happening in rural areas throughout California and other states.

Llamas and alpacas aren't a curiosity everywhere. Andean Indians in South America domesticated them over 5000 years ago. But in the United States, camelids from other continents (four species from South America and two from Africa and Asia) were relegated to zoos.

In the last 15 years, however, llamas and alpacas have quietly moved from zoos to ranches, backyards, hiking trails, hunting trips, show arenas, public auctions, county fairs, and even investment portfolios. Still, they don't fit traditional definitions of stock animals, which may be the key to their primary appeal. They aren't ridden or slaughtered, but they have won the affections of everyone from movie stars and backpackers to established cattlemen.

Both llamas and alpacas may seem like exotic animals, perhaps because of such fictional creations as the two-headed llamalike Pushmi-Pullyu in the Dr. Dolittle stories. But they aren't exotic. According to the classification of animals by the California Department of Fish and Game, llama and alpaca owners need no exotic game breeder permits.

Llamas, the bigger of the two animals (250–500 pounds), were bred into existence as beasts of burden, as well as a wool and meat source. The alpaca was selectively bred into a smaller form (100–175 pounds); its hollow-fibered fleece is characterized by a 16–22-micron range and an absence of guard hair, making it one of the finest domestic wools in the world. In South America, alpaca wool is still the economic backbone of many of the stark alpine areas in Peru and Bolivia. Llamas, whose fleece usually lacks the consistency of the alpaca's, have less economic value since the advent of mules and motorized transport.

But in North America it is a different story. Male llamas sell anywhere from $700 to $15,000, while females range from $6500 to $50,000 apiece. Adult alpacas usually carry a flat price of $12,000 each regardless of sex or age.

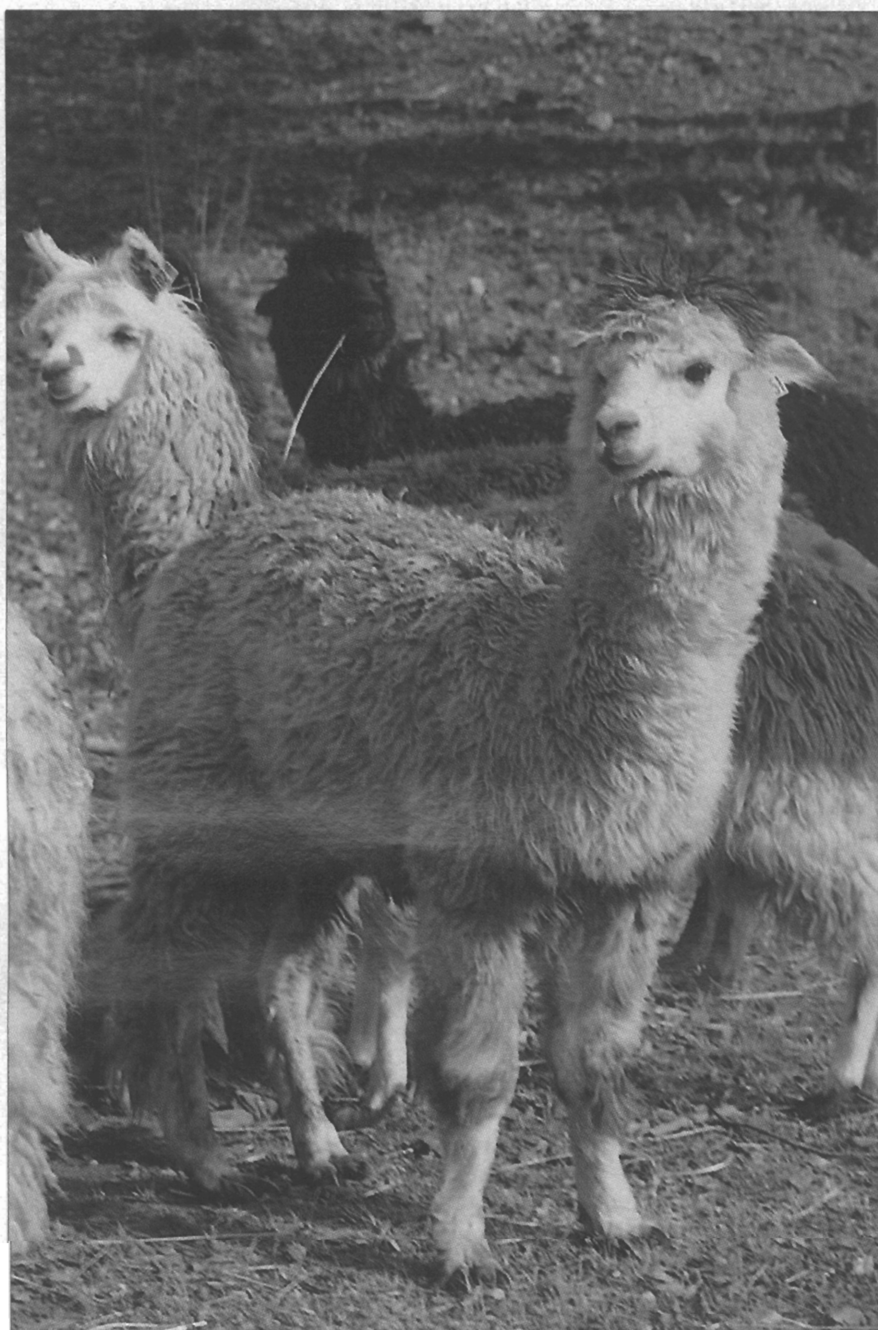

PHOTO BY ERIC HOFFMAN

Llamas and alpacas have made the break. You can now find them in backyards, show-rings, and investment portfolios.

What's at work economically is simple to understand. There's more demand than supply. According to many established breeders throughout California, there are more buyers than sellers. Some llama ranchers even boast waiting lists. There are estimated to be about 10,000 llamas and 500 alpacas in the United States.

With strong demand and high prices, it would seem that importing the animals from South America would add up to hefty profits for someone with financial resources and an entrepreneurial bent. But there has been great difficulty in importing South American camelids regardless of the demand or the resources of the importer. Most South American countries either aren't interested or are off-limits because of USDA-identified disease control problems. In recent years, only Chile has cleared USDA requirements, and a few hundred animals were exported to the United States.

But the forces that must come together to allow importing are fickle. Presently imports are not allowed, and domestic breeders, who fear that uncontrolled imports might adversely affect the market, have hired expensive Washington legal help to curb further imports.

Tom Hunt, whose Texas-based family runs perhaps the biggest exotic animal import business in the world, is one of two importers who successfully brought 270 camelids (mostly alpacas) into the United States in 1984. Hunt sees the likelihood of flooding the North American market as remote, even without a domestic lobby against it. "Bringing camelids in from South America is more difficult than getting animals out of Africa," Hunt says. "It's very high-risk and an easy place to lose your investment. Animals undergo very intensive testing. Traces of any number of diseases in quarantine at either the South American or U.S. end can result in the loss of an entire shipment.

"There are two governments whose very stringent requirements must be met in order to safeguard their respective livestock industries. Plus, Chile, the one country that allowed exportation in this decade, doesn't have that many camelids available. Importing from South America isn't an activity I'd recommend for the faint-hearted. There are no guarantees even after you've sunk a million into setting up quarantine stations, arranging for air transports, and wading through red tape."

Llamas and alpacas got their firmest footing in the United States when newspaper czar William Randolph Hearst decorated his palatial estate in San Simeon with them in the 1930s. Most of the llamas and alpacas found in the United States can be traced to Hearst's animals. In the ensuing 50 years, there have been only two successful importations during the brief periods when USDA has approved them. Still, in recent years soaring U.S. prices have lured a growing number of importers into trying to bring a shipment in.

To an outsider, all the to-do about humpless camels that, if teased, may spit on you may seem hard to understand. Llamas and alpacas appear to have been designed by a committee working from a spare-parts room deep in the hull of Noah's Ark—wool finer than sheep's fleece, the agility of a deer, sizes ranging from that of a goat to a large pony, padded feet like those of an ostrich, a powder-puff tail, the curiosity of a cat, and the eyelashes of a movie starlet. All of this adds up to a lucrative business for those who swear by these South American camelids. But what about utility? After all, you can't ride them like a horse. They're rarely served up in stew like a steer or a hog, and though their wool is valuable (particularly the alpaca's), few owners are selling it commercially.

The answer to their strong market value seems to be in a curious combination of chic, high finance, ecological ethics, easy care, and something one breeder calls "the lovability factor."

Llama and alpaca aficionados include people not usually associated with livestock. Apple Computer whiz Steve Wozniak, human bunny packager Hugh Hefner, singer Michael Jackson, former Santa Clara Valley congressman Pete McCloskey, Westinghouse president Douglas Danforth, and actress Kim Novak are among their better-known fans.

Arizonan Harry Goulder, whose family's expansive ranches throughout the Southwest produce some of

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the best Brangus cattle in world, is quietly collecting a herd of alpacas. "I was attracted to alpacas because they are rare, good around children, and about the best-looking animal I've seen," Goulder says. "I think their charm and looks will always be marketable." Goulder's goal is to put together one of the best alpaca herds in North America, and he's willing to pay to achieve that end. "I looked all over the U.S. and Canada before I settled on a top stud." The animal cost over $20,000.

While looks, affection, and associations may account for some of the attraction, ecology, economics, and easy care add their part to it too. Llamas offer an ecological alternative to traditional pack animals, whose heavy hooves punch platter-sized craters in fragile alpine meadows and whose appetites denude trees and meadows. Llamas tread lightly on padded feet, browse rather than graze, and will even settle for leaves in a pinch. Unlike horses, they don't succumb to overdrinking or overeating. Even though they can't heft a person, they can carry about one-quarter of their body weight, which usually translates into a 100-pound load. Russ Shields, owner of Pack-a-Llama in Gilroy, one of the most active llama-packing outfits in California (there are over 40 nationwide), points out, "Llamas have a relatively low intake for their size, which allows them to pack gear and their own food too, if the trek calls for it. They consume about one-fourth to one-third as much as a horse and, carry half as much weight, which makes them the more efficient pack animal."

Shields also points out that during the winter, when the packing season is dormant, and pack stock eat and board their way through their owners' checkbooks, llamas are more tolerant. "They're easy to house and don't require heavy-duty fencing or even barbed wire. A 4-foot-high, wire-mesh fence is adequate. Four or five llamas can live comfortably on a quarter-acre. And a llama eats about 150 pounds of good oat or alfalfa hay a month, which adds up to the cost of keeping a large dog."

Soquel-based veterinarian Ty McConnell, whose practice takes in nearly 200 llamas and alpacas in the Monterey Bay area, says, "Llamas and alpacas are very hardy. They only require about 6 percent protein in their diet, and the necessary annual inoculations are minimal." McConnell recommends annual tetanus and clostridium injections and either BOSE injections or selenium-enriched salt blocks in selenium-deficient areas.

McConnell finds his patients easy to treat. "I've never had to use restraining devices while performing routine procedures, especially with alpacas, which seem bred to cooperate. Both animals respond favorably to anesthesia and experience few birthing problems." They do have a few peculiarities, though, according to McConnell. "They're self-induced ovulators, which has made artificial insemination nearly impossible."

Their agility, trail smarts, and silent ways allow them to negotiate terrain and situations that would give a horse fits. Bonny Doon llama and alpaca breeder Cecile Champagne, who treks in the Sierras and in the Big Sur area with her llamas, gives them high marks for trail sense. "They're smart," Champagne says. "When tied out to graze on a lunge line, they rarely tangle and never panic. I've seen a llama wind its rope around a small tree and eventually find himself nearly snug to the trunk. Instead of panicking and struggling like a horse, he slowly backed around the tree, retracing his steps until he was free again."

Hunters who have used llamas to pack game out of inaccessible mountain areas give them high marks too. According to deer hunter Vaughn Stumpf of Santa Cruz, "Llamas travel without making a noise and they don't panic. In fact, their sight is so good they often see game before I do."

Male llamas are also territorial by nature and alert to the designs of dogs and coyotes—a trait harnessed by California and Wyoming sheepmen, who have used llamas for predator control. In test situations set up at the University of Wyoming, they have successfully kept hungry coyotes away from sheep for weeks on end. But the jury is still out on just how reliable llamas are because the degree of their

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diligence in protecting sheep seems to vary from llama to llama. And though they will often chase a coyote or dog and emit high-pitched alarm calls easily heard a half-mile off, some llamas have been victimized by predators—usually dogs.

Llamas are also far easier to transport than more traditional stock animals. Breeder Champagne totes two 400-pound male llamas to trail heads in a Volkswagen van. When she switches to alpacas, she can carry four. She points out that llamas and alpacas don't have the uninhibited bowel movements common to most forms of livestock in transit. "They're clean and will wait up to six hours. If they stand up while traveling, it's time to pull over and let them out to relieve themselves."

Packing in the western United States and cart-pulling in the mountainless Midwest have attracted a great number of people to llamas, but the top dollar for premium llamas is not going for performance animals. Show llamas, characterized by extreme wooliness, thick bones, and a somewhat barreled chest, have been bringing top dollar in the two national auctions held in Nebraska and Oregon in the last year. This past August in Grants Pass, Ore., a female llama sold for $51,000 in a well-attended auction that grossed nearly $800,000 while redistributing nearly 200 llamas and alpacas.

Surprisingly, considering the amounts that are often bid, there are no standards of breed that define an optimum animal. Nevertheless, shows with ribbons and sales have been held in half-a-dozen states during the last 12 months.

California leads the nation with over 150 breeders and owners listed in the International Llama Association national directory. (There are two nationally organized llama and alpaca associations: the International Llama Association, headquartered in Bainbridge Island, Wash., and the Llama Association of North America, headquartered in Sacramento.) Nevertheless California has so far abstained from shows and auctions.

John Mallon of Escondido, the head of the southern California chapter of the ILA, thinks he knows why. "There's hesitancy to jump into that kind of thing with no standards. Plus most Californians that I know can sell their animals easy enough from their ranches without being inconvenienced with spending time and money going to public shows and sales."

The direction of shows has kicked off a debate within the llama community. The idea of showing animals is relatively new and comes largely from traditional stockmen who have applied the show-promotion techniques commonly associated with cattle and horses to llamas. The fact that promotion, halter shows, and sales take place with no agreed-upon criteria is unsettling to some breeders. There is concern in the industry that some of the more utilitarian traits may be bred out of the llama since the lanky, shorter-haired optimum pack and cart animal hasn't done as well in the show-ring.

Others see new directions and an even broader market emerging from shows, which emphasizes appearance instead of performance. "There's enough room in the market for those who like shows and performance animals," says Roger Anderson of Davis. The direction of the market is also sorting itself out with what many breeders refer to as "the alpaca factor."

Cecile Champagne sees alpacas as increasing in value from the trend toward show rings. "Ironically, many llama breeders spent years breeding towards woolly, compact llamas that really look like alpacas. That was before alpacas were imported in 1984. Now the obvious question is, 'Why breed for an alpaca when you can own one?'" In addition, many llama fanciers are breeding for the woolly look by crossing alpacas and llamas, which is the subject of still another debate. Should the breeds stay pure?

Hunt sees alpacas as the ultimate winner in the show-ring. "I emphasized alpacas in our 1984 importation because they are so rare in the U.S. and the animal fits the bill for the llama client who is looking for the ultimate woolly, tractable camelid that has all the show qualities of the best llamas."

Llama breeder Mary Boardman of Hayfork probably sums up what's down the road for the llama and alpaca market when she says, "Barring a flood of imports, things look good. I'm continually amazed at the broad spectrum of people who buy and own llamas and alpacas. I've sold animals to judges, truck drivers, cattlemen, investors, and college professors, whose only previous experience with animals was with a pet cat. The animals have broad appeal for many reasons. Besides making a good income from them, I just enjoy their stoic resolve and quiet dignity."

The author is a free-lance writer living in Santa Cruz.

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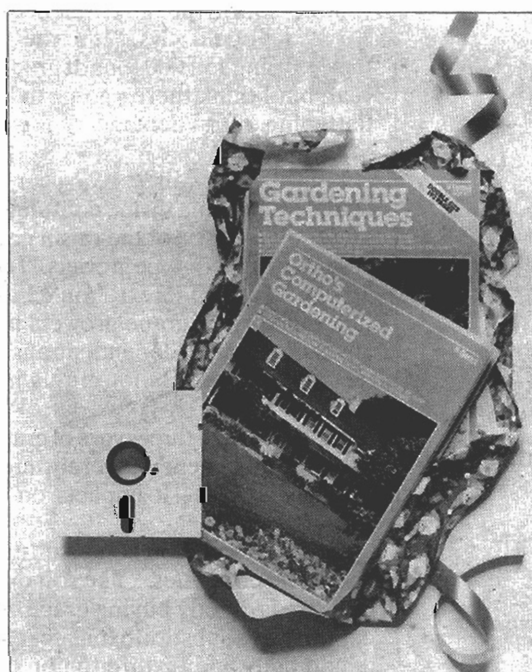

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