

where do suris come from?

by Andy Tillman

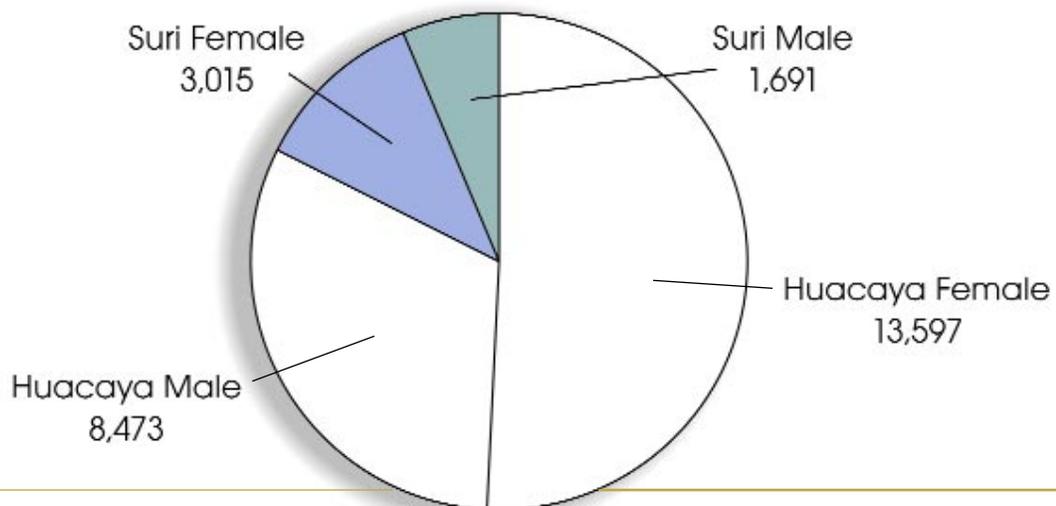


According to data supplied by the Alpaca Registry Incorporated (ARI), less than one-fourth of all alpacas currently residing in the United States are suri alpacas. As of December 20, 2000, there were 13,597 female huacaya alpacas registered in the United States, plus 8,473 males. This compares to a population of 3,015 suri females and 1,691 males. So about 22 percent of female alpacas are suri and 19 percent are males.

The relative suri alpaca population of South America is actually much less than this on a per capita basis. In fact, suri alpacas are so rare that there may be fewer of them than the vicuña, the wild ancestor of the alpaca. According to data provided to the Suri Network by the Michell Brothers of Arequipa, Peru, over the last twenty years, only about 3 percent of their annual alpaca clip has been suri. According to Michell spokesman Juan Pepper, Michell has maintained a 60 to 70 percent market share of alpaca processing. In a typical year, this influential mill would purchase and process less than 150,000 kilograms of suri fleece. This compares to a yearly purchase of 4,000,000 kilograms of huacaya.

Suri Alpaca Population in the U.S.

(As Of December 20, 2000)



The Michell data is probably one of the best, if not the very best, census estimates on suri alpaca population. Dividing the Michell data by a typical shorn fleece weight of 2.7 kilograms (6 pounds) suggests that the mill is handling the clip from nearly 1,500,000 huacaya alpacas. This coincides well with Michell's market share and various national census estimates for Peru which have varied from about 2,700,000 to 3,100,000 alpacas. (The dry weather created by El Niño resulted in a reduction of the alpaca population throughout most of the Andes.)

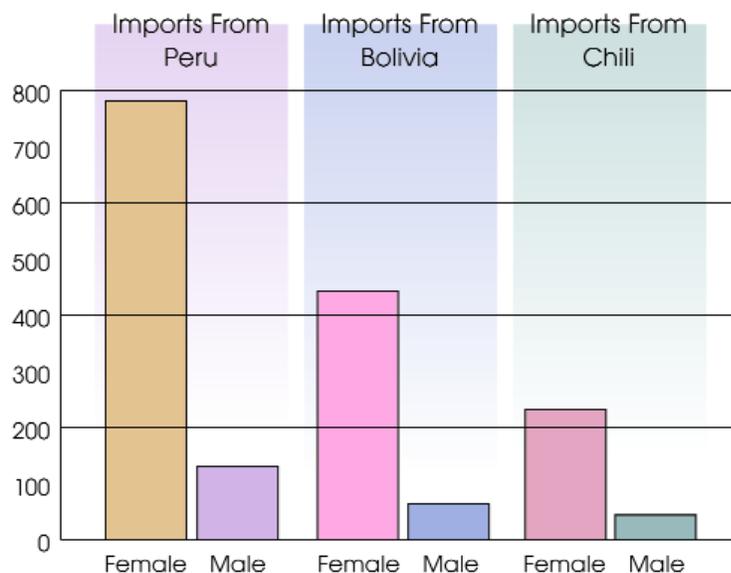
Based on the Michell data, it is very likely that there are barely 100,000 suri alpacas in all of Peru. Adding the population of huacaya and suri alpacas in Bolivia (600,000), and Chile (80,000) will only add another 20,000 suris for a total suri alpaca population of about 120,000 head. This does suggest that the domestic suri alpaca is even more rare than the vicuña.

The first suri alpacas imported into the United States came from Bolivia in the winter of 1991. They were imported through the Harry S. Truman Animal Import Center (HSTAIC) in Key West, Florida by Billy Bohrt (the exporter), and the importers, Bill Barnett and Phil Mizrahie. Andy and Dr. Cheryl Tillman imported 182 suris from Bolivia in 1996. Bohrt and Barnett imported again in 1998. Importations from Peru occurred in 1993, 1995, 1996 and 1998 by Camelids of Delaware and their principal partners Tom Hunt, Jurgen Schultz, Fred Swift, and Phil Mizrahie. The first suris from Chile were imported by Bruce Barr and partners Kathy Lynn and Sandy Jetmundson in 1996. The majority of Chilean suris (about 200 head) were imported in 1998. Alpacas from Chile are imported through low security quarantine in Newburgh, New York.

The HSTAIC was closed by USDA in 1998, making future imports from Peru and Bolivia directly into the United States impossible. At the end of 1998, the Alpaca Registry was closed to imports without eight known ancestors from an affiliated registry. The HSTAIC was closed later, making future imports from Peru, Bolivia, and Chile directly into the U.S. impossible.

Based on data supplied by ARI to the Suri Network, nearly one-half (48.5 percent) of all female suris are direct imports from one of these three South American countries, which

Suri importation statistics



suggests just how new an industry we are. Only 14 percent of males are direct imports.

About 25 percent of all suri females (781 head) were imported directly from Peru, 15 percent (443 head) from Bolivia, and 7.5 percent (232 head) from Chile. In addition, 131 suri males were imported from Peru, 63 from Bolivia and 44 from Chile. The very small number of imported males may suggest just how important it is to not breed "country pure."

White remains the dominant color in the United States, with 57.3 percent (2,723 head) being white. Fawns, including LF, MF and DF, account for 21.3 percent of the population, with browns being 14.1 percent, blacks 4.6 percent and grays being only 0.9 percent. ❖

Andy Tillman and his wife, Dr. Cheryl, have been breeding alpacas and llamas as their primary business for 26 years. Andy and Cheryl imported the influential Bolivian suri and huacaya alpacas in 1996. The Tillmans initiated the tradition of donating a female alpaca to the annual AOBA auction in 1996, and contributed again in 1999. Andy is a co-founder of ALSA and former member of the AOBA Long Range Planning Committee. (541) 389-1065; andy@tillmanllamas.com