How to grow awareness of, interest in, a positive image and profile of llamas in the UK, a call to action!

Although it has proved impossible to obtain accurate numbers, interest in owning and breeding llamas appears to have remained relatively stagnant in the UK has for some years now.

Meanwhile, interest in the llama brand globally has been growing exponentially. As in my previous article on the pictorial representation of articles in Llama Link illustrated, the llama has become a motif, emblem, theme etc. for hundreds of garments, it has inspired best selling children’s literature and so on and so forth. Retailers such as Paperchase, Lakeland Plastics, Asda to name but a few, are all at it, putting a llama on just about everything going. Even tattooists are doing a brisk trade in inscribing llamas on people’s bodies and IT companies in designing llama themed computer games.

Because llamas have proved capable of capturing my heart, I naturally assume they have the capacity to do the same to others, including those with special needs. If llama trekking, showing, driving and dressing is proving popular in one of the world’s leading trend setting nations what’s to say it cannot happen here? I strongly believe there is a potentially larger market out there for owning and engaging with llamas but it is restricted at present by lack of opportunities. Compared to those countries where the llama is experiencing growing popularity it has reduced exposure, a less positive image and more significantly, a broader demographic amongst keepers and promoters of all things llama.

The current UK owner demographic is predominately female, middle aged, hobbyist perceived as slightly eccentric. This is not to say they are (I do not, for example, think I am eccentric walking my llamas in the neighbourhood but some local residents surely do!) but not surprisingly seen in that vane because of the way they are sometimes presented and even sometimes the way they, eccentric or not, present themselves in the popular media. It is not exactly the young, upwardly mobile, model, inspirational trend setter that is seen communicating with llamas and experiencing fun with them although perhaps the male model modelling Next llama pyjamas below is an exception. As I have written elsewhere, the fact that llamas themselves are visually presented in modern social media as somewhat odd, quirky or bizarre does not help although by the same token I do not necessarily see this as problematic since their novelty can also be put to good use by a creative marketing executive.
So where do we begin? Well I believe it has got to start from a young age. Once young children are introduced to llamas via appealing story books they may be embarking on a life-long journey with them. As a youngster they may wish to dress one, groom one, train one, own one, show and compete with one as many already aspire to do and have done for decades with ponies.
Figure 3 - Start 'em young

Figure 4 - Buck the trend - try a llama instead

Figure 5 - Alpaca young handlers & exhibitors - Why not llamas?
In North America, such initial interest is sustained through youth programmes that tie in with both formal and informal education. That is nationally recognised and certificated courses in llama husbandry, showing, etc. There are also opportunities to access llamas in different ways – you can own one even though you may not have the facilities at home to keep them through accommodating them at livery yards. You can show them even if you do not own one if you have successfully completed extra-mural courses in llama husbandry and showing. There is a broader range of competitions such as llama dressing and agility races, so well illustrated in the film *Llama Nation* and opportunities to parade their animals not only at shows but town carnival processions and school events. Llamas have also been successfully trained to fulfil other tasks such as driving, trekking, animal assisted therapy work creating both recreational and career opportunities, similar to in the equestrian world in the UK. The ongoing success story of the Pony Club in the UK is through similar activities from which a very high percentage branch out in different areas of equestrian activity from breeding through dressage, eventing, show jumping, trekking and even tetrathlon and modern pentathlon securing a life long involvement and reward that sustains the whole industry.

The time to do these things is now whilst Anna Dewey’s *Llama Llama* series is a top selling children’s bedtime story book, youths are sleeping under llama themed bedding and adults wearing llama themed t-shirts.

The British Llama Society could support their development as a family pet. Show animal, etc. by actively:

Encouraging diversification in breeding programmes to develop specific llamas types selectively bred to be fit for purpose through supporting AI, Embryo Transfer, importation of llamas to broaden the gene pool of the national herd from which trekkers, therapy, etc. llamas can be produced.

Producing information leaflets designed to attract young people’s interest and make them more of a reality to own.

Having a presence at social events such as agricultural fairs, carnivals, school visits, etc.

Talking to agricultural colleges about how they might buy into llamas to broaden the employment opportunities of their students through careers in llama breeding, trekking, animal assisted therapy etc. (as they already do for equestrian related activities)
Actively seeking new Board members that sit outside the current mould –i.e. younger people less interested in preserving the status quo but energized to create new ideas and opportunities that appeal to future generations, livestock breeder, marketing, PR/Media specialists, etc.

Organise competitions and exhibitions in show off what llamas are capable of doing and how they can be enjoyed.

It could make a commitment to have a presence, even if only a stand as part of an education marquee etc., at at least a dozen Agricultural shows.

Add to the competitions at the annual show in Newbury, to include new classifications and classes, organise young handler’s event (similar to how the BAS does), hold exhibitions in llama driving and when sufficient in number - rallies. Society treks are fine for older members but let’s face it what young person would want to join such a saunter.
My thoughts are grounded in my work experience in sport. It was only a decade ago that the UK Government decided that in the new era of accountability, it had to see evidence of returns for its growing investment in sport. To do so, it pressurised the grant aided Governing Bodies to get their house in order and their act together. It demanded that their Boards included members that represented the required expertise – subject knowledge, finances, marketing, legal; reflected wider age, gender, ethnic balances at all levels but also brought experience from other fields of business and out of the box thinking. It limited the length of service these individuals could hold position to 3 years with a rotational turn over to avoid disruption. It demanded that all stakeholders and especially youths (ie the future) had a voice in decision making through committee representation and reporting routes. It demanded the sports bodies had a clear mission statement, a vision of where they were aiming and detailed action plans to achieve these. It demanded that they sought new and appealing ways to promote and profile their sport, bring in new members to broaden the base of the pyramid and structured competitions to drive up standards. Many said it was impossible and were dragged into the new era kicking and screaming. It is not all a fairy story since on occasions dubious methods were employed to achieve set targets (such as bullying) but they have succeeded in introducing fresh ideas and formats to grow numbers, achieve success on the field of play and secure financial sustainability. Isn’t it time for the BLS to do similar whilst the time is ripe?

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