Paddock Management

Llama Paddock Management – it may not be as straightforward as you perhaps first thought!

by Richard Cox, Hillview Llamas
Life is a balancing act and so too would it appear is llama husbandry. Around 12 months ago, I made a plea for more serious content in the pages of *Llama Link*: This is part of my attempt to redress that balance having been asked to write this article. In it, I attempt to explain my current understanding of the issues in good paddock management and the rationale for what I do. I do not claim to be an authority on the subject of llama husbandry or a long experienced practitioner; there are others far more qualified than I. However, what I do have is a desire to do the best that I can for my llamas. I writing this article is my way of putting out there for public scrutiny my interpretation and understanding of all that I have gained from considerable research and discussion. Please accept this article as such and that if anyone has hard evidence contrary what follows, please contribute to the discussion and debate in order that we might improve what we do for our llamas. What I hope it achieves is a move away from the well-intentioned but misinformed advice that has sometimes been passed on in these pages and is based on folklore and speculation rather than proven facts.

Though, like goats and some other hardy animals, llamas are said to be excellent foragers capable of surviving, if not thriving, on limited habitats, llamas in the UK are not generally in this position and so rely solely on the wisdom and good will of their keepers to obtain good husbandry practice. Our domesticated llamas are enclosed to generally very limited areas of land and herbage and tainly not in a position to roam and wander miles to seek what they by instinct seem to know they need for good health. The rest mine get to this is when I take them out for walks down country lanes and allow them to browse in the hedgerow, which they with great relish. This means that what land they do have access on a daily basis should support these needs. Leaving aside for moment buying in special camelid proprietary feed mix (which for various reasons is inappropriate and insufficient in itself), the y place this can ultimately come from is the land on which they live and to a lesser but equally vital extent, the air they breathe surrounds them. So a useful starting point for any llama keeper should be consideration of their soil or growing medium to sure it can support the growth of forage their llamas need; that it has the optimal structure and contains, in balance, the necessary ments and minerals, and nutrients for growth. Wisdom on this topic has developed over centuries through experience and in more ent years as the result of intensive and extensive scientific research. It is a very complex subject on which there is a vast literature, and this brief article can only be a simplified synopsis of some of it.
To help improve drainage of the clay areas I with clay belts passing through sandy soils. modify this. My land is a mix of the two churned up by animal movement and water allowing them to be more readily drain less quickly, retaining more surface elements and water. Clay based soils, on the means it generally requires more regular good drainage for water or rain also tend to management. Sandy soils with their large particulates and collect their nutrients up through the plant to where they are needed as a result of capillary rise and ‘transpiration pull’. Other essential nutrients needed as a result of capillary rise and infiltration of roots within the soil. With this comes increased run-off, poor root growth, and a reduction in the microbial life due to a lack of oxygen. This is especially problematic with clay soils. One can help get round the problem to some extent by subsoiling or moeling in the autumn. This breaks the pan making it more pervious. I use it to speed up recovery from machinery used in hay making and as an opportunity to do a bit of over seeding, dropping new seed in the furrows before they close up again. Generally speaking, llamas do not compact the ground anything like as much as cattle and horses.

### Soil Content
As well as modifying the soil structure to make it better draining and workable, soil needs to contain or perhaps more accurately be surrounded by the right ingredients to feed the plants it is to support. As well as water, plants need the following macronutrients: nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca), sulphur (S), magnesium (Mg). Soil also needs the following micronutrients or trace elements and minerals to help the plants grow and ultimately feed into the digestive system of the animals that feed on it: boron (B), chlorine (Cl), manganese (Mn), iron (Fe), zinc (Zn), copper (Cu), molybdenum (Mo), nickel (Ni). These elements, which need to exist in solution in water molecules surrounding the mineral particles to be absorbed by the roots, also need to be in balance so that some elements in the soil are not locked by others. pH is critical in this respect. Grass grows best in soil with a pH around 6 (i.e. slightly alkaline). This can readily be modified by adding lime (calcium or magnesium carbonate) to increase pH or in the case of excess alkaline, peat to decrease pH. Further on you will see the negative impacts of excesses of certain elements but for now, nitrogen supplied in the form of nitrates can have an acidifying effect on the soil in the upper layers. Artificial fertiliser is expensive, eco-unfriendly (because of the energy to produce it) and it is a waste to choose a mix that, whilst making up deficiencies in one component, leads to excessive levels of another. Far too often I have witnessed individuals go for a fertiliser high in nitrogen. They see how it makes the grass grow fast and green and think it must be doing some good. However, in some situations, this is far from true. I have heard a complaint that the application of seaweed fertiliser was ineffective because there was no visible increase in grass growth. Sadly, this is ignorance on two levels. The seaweed fertiliser was low in nitrogen so as not to promote sword growth but rich in minerals and elements to enhance the health of tissue in the animals. You also need to consider whether you are going to take a hay crop off the land. Nitrogen fertiliser may well give you a big crop to cut but take a lot of making (due to greater foliage/higher moisture content) and be less palatable to llamas (as compared to cattle, for example who are more selective). It may even have less nutritional value. Where there is the option, my llamas always go for the short grass supplemented by ‘fibrous hay’ to aid their digestion.

To check the balances, I would recommend you have your paddock soils tested at least every other year. It is not expensive and can save you money in the long run (less/correct fertiliser). Below is the read-out from a detailed profiling of one paddock. You can immediately see what, if anything, the land is short of and normally the company will talk you through what products and application rates they would suggest. You will see that from my results, I was slightly short in calcium, sodium and sulphur. I bought a small amount of rock salt locally for 5p a bag (I do live where 100% of Britain’s supply is extracted from) to bring the sodium up to scratch (1 cwt per acre) and spread gypsum (calcium sulphate) to get the calcium and sulphur levels ‘normal’. As noted above, this also helps break down the clay to improve drainage. Two years earlier, I had spread Grass Track (which Yarra no longer produce) to bring the trace elements to acceptable levels. I now use Suregrow’s CSM.

Not all elements and minerals need to be added artificially of course. There are organic ways round some of these problems, achieved mechanically and/or through selective planting which nicely leads us onto the next topic – herbage, but finally on this subject, remember there are optimal times to apply some additives. Very soluble forms can leach out of the soil if spread when the water table is high or the grass is not already growing sufficiently to make use of it. For others, it does not matter either because of its composition or form in which it is produced to control its release (prilled, granularised, etc.) If it is to be spread by machinery, then the state of the ground is another consideration to avoid compaction.
B- Herbage

Having got the soil in order, there is the matter of herbage. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of grass species and herbs developed over time for different purposes. Grass suitable for intense harvesting for silage for cattle may look rich and green and grow fast, but it is not right for llama grazing. For a start, it grows aggressively and is short lived. If you allow it to be grazed by your llamas they may well end up with bloat. Generally speaking, you require a good mix of grasses to ensure longevity and growth throughout the year irrespective of the weather. Some grasses mature earlier in the year than others and vice versa.

For a well balanced diet, you also require more than grass. Herbs for some of the necessary trace elements, legumes such as clover for nitrogen fixing and protein for young stock, etc. Boston Seeds used to make a specialist camelid seed mix with a wide range of herbs to meet the llamas’ nutritional needs. Some mixes include other herbs and legumes such as burnett, chicory, plantain, ribgrass, sainfoin, sheep’s parsley and yarrow.

However, you cannot just grow any grass or herb well on any soil. Some species are very specific in their requirements. They can be influenced by soil (type, acidity), drainage and climatic conditions such as rainfall/drought and temperature, exposure to the wind, sea air, etc. What grows well on the fertile plains and in moderate Cheshire is increasingly frowned upon in colder exposed hills of the Northern Pennines, the chalk lands of the Yorkshire Dales or sunny, coastal regions of the South West. Air temperature drops 1°C in every 100m rise above sea level, which impacts directly on grass growth, in particular, the length of the growing season. North-facing pastures take longer to get going in spring than fields looking south. Annual rainfall is much higher and soil depth and quality significantly poorer at higher altitudes. Some species are more tolerant of heavy grazing or trampling than others, and so you need to think about your stocking rates, duration and intensity of grazing. These needs do vary with age and so what best suits a young, growing cria, is not quite the same as an ageing adult. The Recommended Grass and Clover Lists provide information on the best performing grasses and clovers available today. The varieties that make it onto the lists have been independently tested and heavily scrutinised by a panel of experts to ensure only varieties of genuine value to farmers are included.

So, you have the right soil and have chosen a good seed mix, what next? Well, it has to be planted. Some grass seeds and herbs are responsive to how and when they are spread. Drilling is generally more efficient than broadcast seeding, autumn to spring germination, over-seeding to re-ploughing, etc. But again this will be affected by the equipment you have, the weather and whether you have the capacity to put land out of action, etc.

Once sown, the seed must be fed and cared for. Grazing places a heavy demand on the plants and to continually repair and replenish themselves, they need to extract nutrients from the soil and air, possibly at a rate greater than the soil and air can provide, and there may be a need to top up on certain minerals during the growing season and especially if a hay crop has been taken off the land. Lack of water, especially in the heat of the summer, puts the plant under additional pressure.

Grass and most other plants have a limited life-span and need replacing after a few years. They become less vigorous, weaker and less able to cope with the stresses of constant grazing. They become less tolerant of extreme weather, disease, less nutritious and less palatable to the animal and have to be replaced. Although a certain amount of over-seeding can take place naturally if the plants are allowed to reach that stage where they form seeds, this is rarely sufficient. One alternative, if you have the capacity to put a paddock out of action for at least six months, is to plough and totally re-seed. This method is increasingly favoured by grass farmers for several reasons. It is environmentally unfriendly, using fuel and generating carbon pollutants but it is also destructive to micro-organisms which get exposed and killed off, especially in extremes of weather. It also significantly reduces the number of earth worms in the soil because of birds stealing them. The answer is therefore ‘over-seeding’. While this can be done by broadcasting the seed by hand, it is more efficient to have a contractor come in with a specialist over-seeder machine. This blows individual seeds directly into freshly made holes and covers the soil back over all in one action. In my experience, even when the land has been heavily grazed and harrowed before seed hand broadcasting and subsequently rolled, a significant number grows away from the seed, reaching the soil or where they need to be. They fall on the foliage of active plants, are displaced by the wind, eaten by the birds, etc. Finally, on this subject, I was recently told by a farmer that he over seeded his paddock with clover by adding clover seed to the animal feed. Since it was not processed before being eliminated from the body and was provided it with the ideal growing environment within the animal waste, it worked well.

Ploughing is not entirely bad practice, however. When combined with crop rotation it was a traditional way of cleansing the land of parasite worm populations that had built up. While there is an element of truth in this, just how many of the harmful parasites are killed by the method is debateable since some we are also told that worms in egg form can survive many years. Some studies report lower parasite infestations by animals grazing on grass with or planted following the growth of, bioactive crops such as Birdsfoot Trefoil. In talking about parasites, we must remember that discussing them as a whole, however, can be rather futile since there are many types with different life cycles and vulnerabilities, some more harmful than others, etc. This should be borne in mind when reading what follows.

Micro-organisms and Soil Life

Although already touched upon briefly, bacteria and fungi play a critical role in the decomposition and necessary biochemical changes within the soil. They provide nitrogen (N) and sulphur (S) for the plants and play a key role in fixing atmospheric nitrogen making it available to the plants. They too need feeding and supporting. The literature suggests the ideal scenario consists of 25% air, 25% water, 45% mineral and 5% organic matter. In such a scenario the bacteria can thrive and become an army of positive workers, working as hard for you below the surface as they possibly can. However, if these bugs get exposed to large amounts of N (as when excessive amounts of N based fertiliser are spread on the land) they either die, or they have to mineralise a lot of carbon to stay alive. This creates three problems:

1) firstly you are creating, even more, N in the soil which the plants will not use because you have already given them all they can handle, which means it will probably leach away
2) secondly, you are depleting your SOC for no benefit
3) and thirdly, if you are killing large numbers of microbes, they won’t be able to work for you within the soil, so your soil fertility will drop, and your reliance on feeding will grow

Excesses of N can also promote shallow root growth.
growth, which, especially in times of drought, makes the plant more vulnerable.

The earthworms also fulfil an important role here. As a result of their feeding, burrowing, digesting and excreting activities, worms also have an impact on the physical, chemical and biological properties of the soil. Surface worms work on the plant litter and dung on the surface. The shallow worms ingest and mix the soil in the top 200-300mm of soil and the deep worms pull down plant litter and other organic matter and mix them in the depths.

It was not until so many were lost through ploughing (stolen by birds) and application of some chemicals to the land that their criticality was recognised. To check the density of worms, agronomists now take a sample of soil from a metre cube cut out of the ground and count them. There are few ways of increasing the density short of feeding them with the organic matter they thrive on. Fields fertilised with farm manure (but not artificial fertiliser) are successful in this respect. This raises the question of whether poo picking, rather than spreading it, reduces the potential for earth worms to process it.

Just as you can have your soil sent away for testing, you can have your grass or hay tested for sugar and protein levels, etc. Stock in receipt of good nutrition from the grazing certainly requires less supplementary feed. In normal circumstances, there is no reason they need it in this artificially refined form. If only one or two things are low or missing in their diet, such as selenium, then this may be met by giving the llamas access to an appropriate salt lick. However, remember that at certain times of the year, the balance of their diet will change due to the seasonality of certain herbage/foliage and may need to be supplemented "artificially".

Like all living matter, ‘good plants’ are in competition with ‘bad plants’ (weeds) for limited resources. Weeds can outgrow more desirable grasses and herbs and need to be controlled before they start to take over. Topping of grasses before they seed is also important for grazing paddocks. Otherwise, goodness and energy are put into forming longer stems, flowers and seeds which many animals, including llamas, find less palatable. They prefer eating the young new shoots which topping generally encourages. Here it is important to set the cutting height appropriately. In severe cases and/or where machinery is limited, chemical control may be advisable. It is surprising just how many herbicides or selective weed killers there are on the market. These include some that will kill buttercups but not clover, docks but not buttercups, etc. Again you are best discussing this with your local supplier.

Brands I have used include Headland Polo, Pastor and Grazon. Remember some weeds are poisonous and others just nuisance. Examples of the poisonous plants such as Ragwort and Foxglove must be dealt with (See the list circulated with the July 2016 edition of Llama Link), whether this involves physically removing them, spraying them or fencing off access to them. Recently, the sale and application of certain herbicides have been restricted to trained individuals, and you may find it necessary to pay a qualified contractor to do the job for you. Some of the products may necessitate putting the treated land out of use for a period which may pose an issue for some.

The abundance of particular weeds can also usually tell you something about the state of your land. Thistles, for example, often indicate low Ca and Ph but high K and S levels; docks: soils with a high K.P ratio along with high N + K, but with low Ca and P. Interestingly their leaves are high in Mg, P + K so they are not all bad news. Buttercups thrive in compacted, poorly aerated, damp soils with a low humus content. Daisies like low PH compacted soils. Nettles like good moist soil with a high N content, which is why they often grow around where feeders have been or dung piles.

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So, you have the grass and herb mix growing well, but the use of the paddocks also need to be suitably managed for sustainability.

Stocking levels, Stock Movement, Paddock Resting and Rotation

Sections below on harrowing, poo removal, topping and rotation all point to stocking level as being critical. Unfortunately, many commercial farmers and hobbyists like to increase stock to the maximum number they can accommodate. The capacity of a given piece of land, however, will depend on the type of soil, drainage, type and density of herbage, paddock rotation scheme and possibly other factors such as parasite levels as a result of current and previous grazing.

Moving stock around and resting paddocks allows grass and other plants a chance to recover and spend time developing their root structure. As grass grows above the ground, the roots also grow below the ground, and once you graze the grass above the surface a similar proportion of the roots die off below the surface. This root death provides food for all of the soil inhabitants and a proportion of it gets turned into soil carbon. There is six times as much carbon in grass roots as there is in surface plant litter. It helps to understand how it grows above the surface. Once the sword has been eaten off, the grass uses up its store of sugars to push up the first leaf. Once this first leaf has appeared the sugar store has been severely depleted, and the plant relies on the first leaf to act as a solar panel for photosynthesis to grow the second and third leaf, as well as for replenishing the sugar levels in readiness for the next cycle. Resting the plant allows it to grow to its potential and allows it to go through its full natural cycle of growth and replenishment.

So far, we have only talked about stocking levels of the same species. Mixed grazing, with all the caveats mentioned elsewhere in this article, can increase overall stocking rates of a given plot of land. In this respect, be aware of parasites that may affect more than one species. Sheep and goats, for example, carry/are susceptible to many of the same parasites. Waterfowl, on the other hand, are not with the bonus that they are natural foragers of snails, critical in the life cycle of liver fluke and therefore capable of reducing the parasite burden of some types.

Finally, resting a paddock is also claimed to be capable of reducing parasite levels of some forms in their larvae state. While it is true that some forms of parasites in some stages of their development will succumb
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to the extreme elements, others in their egg stage can survive for long periods, irrespective of the weather, subsequent harvests, alternative crops and even ploughing.

The Need for Poo Removal for Parasite Control—myth or an inconvenient truth?

Many authorities advocate removing poo from paddocks and at the earliest opportunity, the reason being that the eggs of parasites deposited in the poo are removed before they can evolve into larvae after only a few days and work their way up the grass sword to be ingested by their primary host, in this case, the llamas. That in the wild they naturally keep moving onto new territory and by the time they return to that area, the parasites have died off through lack of finding a host within the critical time frame.

Arguments put forward against the need to poo pick are that llamas do not ingest grass grown in areas where they defecate and that this allows parasites born of self-protection. That with the grass left long, the larvae also die through dehydration before they reach the end of the sword. Where this idea falls down is the fact that research shows that some parasites in their larval form, in the right conditions, are capable of significant travel horizontally and vertically and have evolved to encroach onto what was previously ‘virgin territory’ in order to secure their host. The ability of any one type of larvae to travel has been found to be influenced by the temperature and type of herbage (the broader the leaf, the greater the density, the easier to move), the climate and weather (easier in cool damp weather). Secondly, in captivity, especially where grass is in short supply such as at the end of the growing season or due to over stocking, llamas have found to become less selective in their grazing and ingest what they can find. Some argue against poo collection because it is said to deprive soil life of essential nutrients which they use to process the poo (and parasites?), take it down to the roots and improve growth and drainage. This begs the question of whether there is any limit to this? Can poo in excess become toxic if allowed to build up year on year? Left on the ground, the high levels of nitrates certainly scorches the grass leaving a bare patch, but there are also increased odds that more will survive to reach the next stage of their development. Finally, others, argue removal is unnecessary at reasonable stocking rates because llamas build up their own natural immunity to some parasites following low-level exposure and may never need medication. Some advocate worming young stock to support them in their first year whilst they develop that immunity.

All this said, if poo is to be removed there is the question of how soon/frequency should it be done and what is the most effective way to do this. My aching back after 10 years of daily shovelling and wheel barrowing it away, constantly reminds me it is unsustainable into my old age. Elsewhere in this article, it has been suggested that allowing the grass grow longer by resting paddocks helps kill off some parasites at the larvae stage. Somewhere else that topping the middens and harrowing exposes larvae to the elements, and this helps kill them off. Unless this applies to different strategies at different times of the year/weather conditions is a little confusing. In the pages of Llama Link and on BLS Facebook site, keepers of large herds have claimed to have found a way of dealing with it. One article suggested that mowing the midden with a forage collector at the end of the growing season dealt with the problem by scooping it up whilst cutting the grass. Another suggested monthly collection with a towed paddock vac and one using a paddock sweeper. All these methods have their shortcomings. Mechanically, paddock vacs are noisy, smelly and fuel thirsty, but more fundamentally they struggle with some consistencies of poo, especially the looser type following scouring with spring grass. In winter, if towed by a heavy vehicle they bruise the sword and help compact the soil. Perhaps more importantly, if left in situ for more than a few days the eggs will have hatched, larvae moved up the grass sword and already ingested by the llama.

Experience has proven to me that if you do choose to poo collect, there is no easy and certainly no comprehensive way of collecting it all. To have a life, I have adopted a mixed approach. When I am able, I get out there and collect with a shovel and wheel barrow. The burden on one’s back can be reduced slightly by the use of a ‘handled shovel’ (with a second-hand hold half way down the shaft) and a finely balanced two wheel or power barrow. When the land is dry and, I have a helper, the paddock vac. The third approach is that in summer when the grass is growing rapidly and requires regular topping. I use a flail collect mower with straight hammers and scarifying flails set at the right height to throw the poo along with the grass cuttings into the collection box for removing.

I have concluded there is no clear-cut right or wrong answer to poo collecting, there are so many types of parasites with different features and life cycles and affected differently by different herbage and climatic/weather circumstances that no single practice would be appropriate for all. Collecting poo can never be comprehensive and will only reduce not eliminate the chances of parasites taking a hold in your llamas. That so long as your llamas do not already carry a significant worm burden, stocking levels are reasonable (up to 4 llamas per acre and scope to rest areas) and pastures are rested, and/or mixed grazed, it may well control itself. If problems arise, then it is important to develop with your vet a treatment strategy for the whole herd (not just those suffering).

Harrowing

Harrowing, especially in spring is useful for dragging out thatch and other organic matter. This helps increase air flow to the foliage. It can also level mole hills, help spread dung (if you consider this desirable after all has been said on this topic) or other fertiliser you may choose to spread. Some argue that harrowing also exposes parasite larvae to the natural elements, and in hot, dry weather many are killed through dehydration. Others argue that spreading manure around the pasture runs the risk of helping spread the ‘infestation because some eggs and larvae are not so susceptible and capable of withstanding extremes for long periods of time.

I drag and tine harrow, the latter to rake out the remains from hay making and also to help create a tith for over- seeding in the autumn, but only after I have collected the poo.

Mowing/Topping

Mention has already been made of grass length in relation to parasite control and topping in relation to weed control. Since llamas generally prefer young grass shoots when its growth in the grazing paddock is in excess of demand, such as at the height of the growing season, I mow it to also encourage the growth of new more nutritious and palatable shoots (14 leaf).

Rolling

I seldom roll the paddock other than to help seed adhere to the soil or creating nice stripes to show off. It does help bury stones and other debris, evens the surface and can also level mole hills, help spread dung and flatten the surface if you make hay on the land. Local folklore also tells me it strengthens and stimulates the growth of young shoots.

Spiking/Slitting

Spiking or slitting can help improve drainage in the spring and autumn. It can also aerate the roots and promote new growth by division of the roots. A verti-drainer is better than a slitter for drainage but would be very much a luxury item for the llama farmer.

Topping

Topping has already been mentioned in respect of weed control and promoting new growth. In the literature, I have read that regular topping off of the midden areas in the growing season is also beneficial to reduce parasites because it exposes them to the heat of the sun which kills some types. On the other hand, I have also mentioned earlier that some have written that larvae are exhausted before they reach where they might be eaten in long grass, become dehydrated and die. If the grass is cut short, they are certainly more likely to be ingested by the llama. I guess the critical factor here is whether the llamas eat that grass or not which may come down to the season (availability of grass) and stocking level. Mixed grazing is a more natural and less wasteful way of topping the midden areas. Sheep, for example, do not seem to mind eating the grass in the llama middens but it important not to use livestock for this purpose which carry the same harmful
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parasites as primary or secondary hosts.

Pests

I doubt any reader needs telling about the importance of good perimeter fencing to keeping the animals in and unwanted visitors out. This is not the place for me to introduce the debate about foxes and badgers, about which I have strong views, however, there are some pests for which fences and hedges offer no barrier. That is snails, slugs and other invertebrates. Slugs apart from being unsightly are not necessarily harmful. They just eat some of the foliage. Snails, on the other hand, despite their small size can be harmful because they act as a critical host in the life cycle of liver fluke. Mixed grazing (ducks and geese are excellent foragers who love snails and slugs), liming, slug pellets and rest are some of the ways of managing them.

D- Conclusion

To conclude, I believe few of us are in a position to do everything we would like to do in an ideal world for our llamas and so decisions have to be made and the right ones for you depends on your priorities within the time and budget at your disposal. What proportions of your time and budget are spent interacting with your llamas: trekking, grooming or simply observing and how much tending to the land, herbage, fencing, drainage and housing, etc. is a very personal one. Of course, there are minimum standards you need to maintain to ensure their health, safety and general wellbeing but where the line lies will always be debatable. Suitable housing, most would appear to agree, is an essential - but badger proof perimeter fencing may be seen as extravagant and worth taking the risk of not installing it, if it affords other benefits to the llamas, like better quality feed. Occasionally, what makes for better soil and herbage is at odds with what is best for the llamas. The abundance of useful micro organisms in the soil will help improve the fertility of the soil but not necessarily benefit the health of the animals if it is the result of leaving their dung left in the field. In so far, a call has to be made and decisions taken as to how to control harmful parasites – poo collection or medical interventions?

My llamas do not have to earn their keep or produce a return for me and so to farmers who have to make their living from their animals my thoughts may already sound somewhat idealistic. I can well appreciate there might be some of this but by the same token, a couple of years ago I had the privilege of being shown around the Duke of Westminster’s farm in Cheshire. Money did not appear to be an issue; the cattle had luxurious accommodation, finest quality feed, a 40-mile badger proof perimeter fencing, etc. and to boot everything was done in an ecologically friendly way. Yet, the farm has to wipe its face and so was any of it an unnecessary luxury or all just good economic sense?

The one thing I am confident about in my mind is that your llamas will only get out of your management what you put into it. And, yes, there is more to health and contentment for llamas than a nice, sheltered home with good food; llamas also need to be kept secure in relatively harmonious environments with appropriate social groupings and regular human contact if regular is a requirement.

I really wanted a pair of Shire horses which I was offered, but as at that time we had 3 herds of Jersey cattle my husband said no, “grass is at a premium and those horses take up too much room and destroy pasture”, so I thought about llamas, and a friend said he had a pair to sell so that was agreed, but he thought that Don didn’t really want me to have them so let them go elsewhere. Then in one of the farming magazines, there were 2 guanacos for sale so my middle son took off down south and came back with one male and one castrate with a note to say a piece of string will keep them in.

As it was late at night when he got back they were left in the trailer till morning, then thinking that the field in front of the house that kept the Jersey bull in would keep them in, he let them out. Half an hour later they were nowhere to be seen, after a search they were found in our next farm up amongst a flock of sheep so we sent the dog round them, the sheep went one way and they went the other, finishing up in our third farm, and apparently as one of the houses on their way had been broken into the night before and they had gone through the garden and set the alarms off the next thing was the police were haring up the road. Eventually, with the help of a lot of people, we managed to get them into our beef unit; you can’t drive them - you have to persuade them, there was a 6ft gate at either end but we still had to have someone at each end to keep them in. Unfortunately there was beef on both sides of the passegeway and they went berserk, at that we had a relief herdsman who was about 18 stone and over 6ft so Don said to him, “just catch that one around the neck please” - next thing was he had been lifted off the ground and landed in the manger…. we learnt a lesson then: it has to be up by the head to hold them. We eventually got them into the livestock trailer and took them home into a loose box and I slowly tamed them down until I was able to take one at a time for a walk. I then got a bit confident and thought I would take them both at the same time….

Fine, except as soon as we were in the yard they started to fight up on their back legs above my head, so I let one go thinking it would be easy to catch but no, it ran away into our neighbour’s field and he was soon round saying, “Come at catch the thing - it’s chasing my brood mares!” I then had to commit the worst sin and stop Don milking to come and help.

I could fill a book on the fun we had with them escaping but better not, so I eventually bought 5 females which was great except that they were wild and never been handled, so I sold 2 and turned the others out with the males and of course you can guess what happened: the males started to fight - in fact, they would have killed one another so, from then on, they had to be kept out of sight of each other. Eventually, we swapped those girls for males, one was also fairly wild so had to have time spent on him but he was always a bit of a handful and after quite a while, and a few youngsters later, he died of old age (23). I did take 5 to the Henley Show the year of the foot and mouth because we got clearance to take animals the day before. They had never been in a trailer before but we managed and, with a bit of persuasion, off they went. They were very well behaved and very noisy about everything going on until after the grand parade - so many people came around us with dogs etc they were getting a bit fidgety…. my son had a stall nearby and saw what was happening so brought the trailer round and as soon as the back came down they shot in.

I used to shear them, having 3 sons used to farming and playing rugby, one held the front end another the back and the third one sheared no trouble except it took ages sat on the lawn picking out the guard hairs before I could spin, so now I just brush them out, and they just stand there and enjoy it.

Tim (left) and Misty (right)

Una Dawes

Writing from Henley-on-Thames

with memories from September 1983

British Llama Society

My llamas do not have to earn their keep or produce a return for me and so to farmers who have to make their living from their animals my thoughts may already sound somewhat idealistic. I can well appreciate there might be some of this but by the same token, a couple of years ago I had the privilege of being shown around the Duke of Westminster’s farm in Cheshire. Money did not appear to be an issue; the cattle had luxurious accommodation, finest quality feed, a 40-mile badger proof perimeter fencing, etc. and to boot everything was done in an ecologically friendly way. Yet, the farm has to wipe its face and so was any of it an unnecessary luxury or all just good economic sense?

The one thing I am confident about in my mind is that your llamas will only get out of your management what you put into it. And, yes, there is more to health and contentment for llamas than a nice, sheltered home with good food; llamas also need to be kept secure in relatively harmonious environments with appropriate social groupings and regular human contact if regular is a requirement.

I really wanted a pair of Shire horses which I was offered, but as at that time we had 3 herds of Jersey cattle my husband said no, “grass is at a premium and those horses take up too much room and destroy pasture”, so I thought about llamas, and a friend said he had a pair to sell so that was agreed, but he thought that Don didn’t really want me to have them so let them go elsewhere. Then in one of the farming magazines, there were 2 guanacos for sale so my middle son took off down south and came back with one male and one castrate with a note to say a piece of string will keep them in.

As it was late at night when he got back they were left in the trailer till morning, then thinking that the field in front of the house that kept the Jersey bull in would keep them in, he let them out. Half an hour later they were nowhere to be seen, after a search they were found in our next farm up amongst a flock of sheep so we sent the dog round them, the sheep went one way and they went the other, finishing up in our third farm, and apparently as one of the houses on their way had been broken into the night before and they had gone through the garden and set the alarms off the next thing was the police were haring up the road. Eventually, with the help of a lot of people, we managed to get them into our beef unit; you can’t drive them - you have to persuade them, there was a 6ft gate at either end but we still had to have someone at each end to keep them in. Unfortunately there was beef on both sides of the passegeway and they went berserk, at that we had a relief herdsman who was about 18 stone and over 6ft so Don said to him, “just catch that one around the neck please” - next thing was he had been lifted off the ground and landed in the manger…. we learnt a lesson then: it has to be up by the head to hold them. We eventually got them into the livestock trailer and took them home into a loose box and I slowly tamed them down until I was able to take one at a time for a walk. I then got a bit confident and thought I would take them both at the same time….

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