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Behavior and Capture Techniques

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Behavior

Llamas and alpacas are intensely herd oriented. Each group of animals has a distinct social structure including a command hierarchy. Interestingly, group hierarchy often changes when the makeup of the group is altered. When herds are moved to a different location, a member of the group is removed, or members of different groups in different pastures are mixed, a period of reorganization occurs.

These dynamics are important when llamas and alpacas are maintained in involuntary groupings based on management decisions (e.g., breeding groups, weaning groups, etc.). Involuntary grouping refers to the fact that small groups are assembled by humans for the purpose of management structure, pasture availability, or other matters of convenience or necessity relative to the working of the farm. Thus, the llamas and alpacas are forced to create stable groups that may not be ideal and, in rare cases, are incompatible. The likelihood of establishing an integrated and stable group can be reduced by limited space. High stocking density creates social stress that is often not perceptible to farm personnel or veterinarians. When regulations are developed for minimum space needs for various species of animals, these guidelines most commonly refer to critical self-care needs to lay down, stand up, turn around, eat, drink, etc. With llamas and alpacas, we have found that these animals seem to have a need for "psychological space." Thus, when herd groups are assembled, space requirements should take into account the need for llamas and alpacas to have the freedom to lay down, eat, move, and so on without disruption of this individual space.

Any assessment of llama and alpaca herds should include an analysis of the herd structure, group compatibility, and space limitations. Occasionally, llamas and alpacas that are losing weight, suffering early embryonic losses, or failing to produce hair or fleece optimally are manifesting these problems as a reflection of herd stress or social stress. This may be present in a herd as a whole or with specific individuals. For example, a herd of 200 alpacas was examined because of a history of weight loss and sudden death. Diagnostic testing suggested deaths were associated with *Clostridium perfringens* Type A overgrowth in the small intestine. Upon inspection of the herd, the 200 alpacas were found to be residing in a rectangular barn of 80 feet by 60 feet square and a 10-acre pasture, and were being fed a daily ration of hay and commercial pelleted supplement. The hay was of good quality (TDN 55%; crude protein 16%) and the grain supplement was appropriate for alpacas and included trace minerals. Observation of hay and supplement feeding revealed that, hay

Veterinary Techniques in Llamas and Alpacas, Second Edition. Edited by David E. Anderson, Matt Miesner, and Meredyth Jones.

was fed based on expected intake with the desire to minimize waste in a feeding trough 60 feet long. The hierarchy of the herd created a dynamic of limited feed access for subordinate members of the herd. Feeding space was inadequate (desired bunk space >18 inches per alpaca; actual bunk space <6 inches per alpaca). Thus, the dominant members of the herd consumed a diet in excess of nutritional requirements, the middle hierarchy alpacas consumed an adequate diet, and the subordinate members of the herd received inadequate nutrition. This problem was resolved by segregating the herd into groups based on body condition score and changing feeding practices such as provision of unlimited grass hay. This achieved the goal of grouping the alpacas based on social compatibility and also matched feeding sources and feeding space to stocking needs more appropriately.

An example of an individual problem occurred in an alpaca herd of 140 alpacas segregated into groups of 20 to 30 alpacas on 5-acre pastures. One alpaca was noted to be progressively losing weight and had a body condition score of 2 out of 10 (1 = emaciated; 10 = obese). Diagnostic investigation revealed evidence of chronic malnutrition despite ample pasture, hay, and a grain-based supplement. Observation of the group dynamics revealed that the alpaca was not integrated with the group and was a "social outcast." The alpaca remained in the areas of the pasture distant from the barn and without interaction with the other alpacas. Thus, the alpaca suffered relative malnutrition because of social limitation rather than because of inadequacy of management or diet. This situation was resolved by removing the female from the pasture and comingling her with other subordinates until a social group could be established.

Capture Techniques

Both herd and individual behaviors should be used to assist veterinary interactions with llamas and alpacas. When performing group activities such as annual vaccination and deworming, these procedures can be easily and readily performed in small groups of animals. Small group settings (e.g., < 10 alpacas; < 5 llamas) lessen the stress of individual handling and may help to prevent stress-induced problems such as peracute ulcers, abortion, and premature births. Ideally, the farm facilities should be used to create a series of enclosures such as pens or corrals so that the entire group or herd can be captured in total, and then smaller groups separated off for procedures and interactions.

When there is a need to capture a single animal within a herd group, the entire group should be captured before attempting to single out the individual. For example, a group of 12 alpacas can be gathered from the pasture into a large pen. A subset of 4 alpacas containing the desired alpaca is separated away from the larger group, then the single alpaca captured, haltered, and taken to the working area. When females have a cria at their side, the cria should be taken to the working area as well. Ideally, the cria would be contained within a small pen adjacent to the female and in full view. This prevents the cria from "wandering off" during the exam resulting in the dam becoming agitated.

Alpacas and llamas have similar "flight zones" as cattle and small ruminants. Cattle, sheep, and goats have different behavioral responses to people. Goats tend to be interactive with people; sheep often respond with fear and run away from humans; cattle tend to be calmer than sheep but less interactive than goats with regard to human interaction. Llamas are most similar to dairy cattle and goats. Llamas are inquisitive but stoic. Human interaction most often is readily achieved, and llamas are less likely to react with sudden or violent maneuvers. Llamas are typically halter trained and can be led easily. This training makes group handling less important for brief activities in llamas. Alpacas are more similar to beef cattle and sheep. Alpacas accept human interaction to a point but will flee if a perceived threat is present. Alpacas are best

worked in groups and using pens or stalls to achieve a close confinement area for whatever activity is needed.

When groups of llamas or alpacas need to be brought in from an open pasture, people doing the herding should use behavioral traits and barriers, such as fence lines, to facilitate driving the group into a containment area. The "flight zone" for llamas and alpacas allows for a single person to drive a herd into an enclosure by maintaining a position relative to the point of the shoulder. By stepping in front of the point of the shoulder, the llamas or alpacas are expected to move away and backward. When the person is behind the animal and distant from them, no movement is expected. The animals can be driven forward when movement toward the animal is done from a position well behind the point of the shoulder. The closer the handler is to the animal the more likely the llamas or alpacas are to turn away from the drivers. The further away the driver is, the more likely the animals are to maintain forward progress. Fence lines are useful to limit side-to-side and sudden reverse movements. If the group is uncooperative or resistant to being driven into the working area, a rope may be used to create a moving barrier or fence line (Figure 1.1). The rope can be anchored to a stationary post at the entryway to the containment area and then a single driver can close this rope around the group to create an ever-decreasing space until the animals move into the capture pen (Figure 1.2). Rope barriers are also useful in open pasture areas if at least two drivers are present. These two people can suspend the rope between them in order create a long barrier to make herding easier until the group is within the capture pen. The rope barrier limits any sudden reversal, or escape movements, by expanding the driving zone and moving the handlers further away from the animals and their pivot point. However, overly aggressive movements, progressing too close to the animals, or making threatening gestures will cause the herd to seek and escape from the situation. In this instance, the herd may charge and break through the barrier. Once the group is in a smaller containment area, each animal can be captured and haltered if needed.

Although many llamas and alpacas are trained to be handled and haltered, uncooperative individuals can easily be captured in a small catch pen (Figure 1.3). The camelid is positioned against a solid barrier or toward a corner of the enclosure and approached from the neutral point of the shoulder. Then the lead rope is swung over the back at the base of

Figure 1.1 A long rope can be used as a movable barrier to herd llamas and alpacas into a containment area.

Figure 1.2 The long rope used as a mobile barrier can be suspended between two people or may be attached to a stationary object and used to gradually reduce the area of containment.

Figure 1.3 Uncooperative patients, such as this alpaca, are most easily captured by initial containment in a stall or pen.

Figure 1.4 A length or rope, such as a lead rope, may be draped across the back while standing behind the point of the shoulder.

the neck (Figure 1.4). Then, the handler slowly walks around the front of the camelid to the neutral point of the opposite shoulder until the animal turns away. The free end of the lead rope is grasped and the rope held firmly to restrain the animal's movement (Figure 1.5). The handler then moves toward the side of the neck closest to the shoulder and wraps the arms around the neck and firmly grasps the neck for restraint (Figure 1.6). A halter is placed on the head (Figure 1.7) and positioned so that the cross strap of the halter is maintained on the bony bridge of the nose (Figure 1.8).

This is important because the rostral end of the nose is cartilaginous and easily collapses

Figure 1.5 After placement of the rope across the shoulders, the handler walks in front of the animal toward the opposite shoulder. This movement encourages the patient to pivot away and expose the free end of the rope. The free end is grasped and the newly formed loop used to control the position of the alpaca.

Figure 1.6 The length of rope is shortened until the handler's arms can be encircled around the base of the neck. Then the arms are moved forward along the neck until positioned behind the head.

Figure 1.7 An alpaca halter is fitted over the nose by first approaching the head with the halter below the jawline.

under pressure, which can obstruct breathing (Figure 1.9). Llamas and alpacas that are halter trained are most often accustomed to being held and lead from the left hand side of the animal (Figure 1.10).

Figure 1.8 The size of the halter is assessed to ensure proper fitting. The nose bridge of the halter should cross immediately in front of the eyes in such a way that the halter is entirely positioned on the bony bridge of the nose.

Figure 1.9 Improperly placed halters can obstruct breathing by compressing the cartilaginous bridge of the nose.

Figure 1.10 Once a halter has been properly fitted, the lead rope should be attached to the halter. Llamas and alpacas are typically led from the left-hand side.