simply suri appearance

by Susan Tellez

Often described as the most unique fiber animal of the world, the suri is the least studied, the least understood, and the most appreciated. The words "Feathery–shining– floating countenance" have all been used to describe this wonderful expression of a fiber type, which is frequently compared to the long wool sheep or the fiber style of Mohair from the Angora goat.

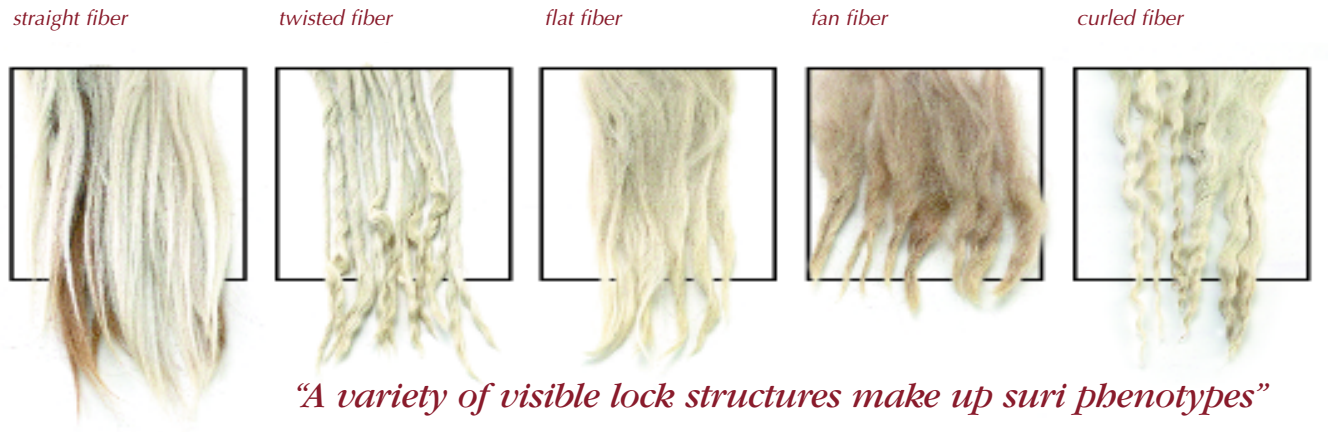
The name "suri" is recognized as the descriptive term for the lesser Rhea of the Ostrich family, Pheidae, for its silky, shiny feathers which have been used by royal families as decorative adornments and even were found on mummies from ancient times. The silky, shiny appearance of the suri commanded the attention of the native peoples of South America who then related that term to the similar countenance of the suri type fiber.

"Suri" appears to be a noun or adjective from the Aymaran language, one of the two Native American language groups in the Andes mountains along the Altiplano of Bolivia, Chile and Peru. According to native informants, the term "suri" means "straight" in Aymara language. The feathers of the rhea are straight. A hard rain that falls straight down is "suri." The reed flute of the Andean pan pipes are "suri." Suri does not mean "lock" or "luster," but the use of "suri" in conjunction with the pan pipes does suggest the lock formation of the suri alpaca.

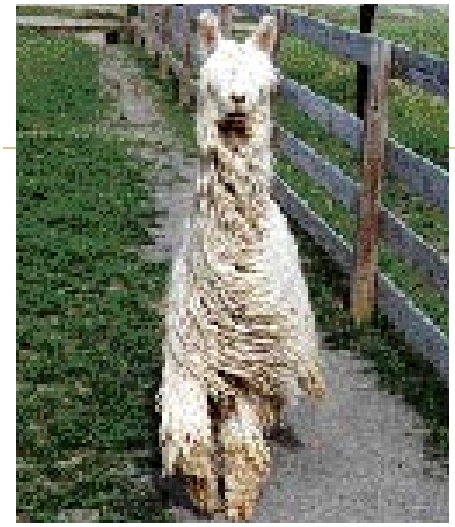
The suri-type fibered animal was recognized more than three thousand years ago, as early as the era of Tahuantinsuyu in Inca times, when many camelids were abundant in the native Central Andes, especially in the area of Lake Titicaca. These animals were not completely described until later.

Cultural pieces indicated a difference in appearance of the camelids, but the size was not relative to an alpaca or llama. Historical pieces (Conopas) from the Inca pieces were exhibited as household idols, and are seen today. These early pieces represented a ropey-like fiber expression, most like what is today called the suri fiber type.

In the article, *The Peruvian Suri Alpaca*, Dr. Julio Sumar quoted the ancient literature of Professor Luis Macagno (1911) as recognizing the areas in Peru surrounding Arequipa and the district of Nunoa as a possible origin of the suri. These special animals have been produced in Peru, Bolivia and Chile.



"A variety of visible lock structures make up suri phenotypes"



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Macagno writes about a "balanced, harmonic, beautifully conformed animal, easily distinguished from other camelids by its fine and abundant shining and draping fleece."

The physical appearance, which is known as the phenotype, of the suri alpaca today remains that of a proud, elegant, strong animal commanding attention by its very upright carriage, presence and proportional balance. Exhibiting approximate equal length of neck/torso/leg, the suri profile maintains an appearance of a more level top line, erect head with a neck longer than the majority of the huacaya type alpacas.

The suri head may appear smaller and express an ear length up to two centimeters longer than that of a huacaya and in a profile view will often demonstrate a more tapered short muzzle, often covered by the long, drapey forelock of fiber.

"Representing the cumulative achievement of generations of selective breeding, the suri is an aristocratic little animal and carries itself in a manner which would indicate its consciousness of this fact. The fleece hangs over the flanks as a Mantilla (shawl) over the shoulders of a beautiful woman, frequently completely concealing its feet." (Stroock; 1951).

From all these descriptions has evolved the simple pure suri phenotype, recognized today and selected for preservation by owners. Coupled with its known rarity (approximately one to three percent) of the world population of fine fiber producing animals, and with approximately only 4,600 suris listed with the Alpaca Registry Inc. for United States, members of the Suri Network have dedicated themselves to the preservation of this precious treasure.

Comments from Don Julio Barreda, a world renowned and recognized alpaca breeder from Peru in the September 1999 Alpaca Market Report by the International Alpaca Association, reflect these same sentiments. As an admirer and defender of the suri, he notes their slow disappearance during the past thirty years, and challenges all groups with interest to form a program for recovery of the suri breed.

As quoted by Don Julio Barreda, "…nevertheless, it depends mainly on us, the breeders, to bring about the recovery of this beautiful animal that once appeared to have fallen from the sky like hail as a gift to the Ccollas, Quechuas and Aymaras, and today needs to be shared with the whole world."

Suri Fiber Characteristics

The very unique, rope-like, twisted locks of the suri easily distinguish that fiber style from the compact, spongy, or often fluffy huacaya fiber appearance. These long fibers hang parallel to the body sides and neck, falling from the mid-line of the back in individual locks which contain groups of straight fibers without evidence of crimp (the zig-zag expression seen in huacaya fibers). These fibers or locks may be in straight, twisted, flat, fan, or curled configurations, as shown on page 20. The curled, twisted, and straight locks represent the preferred suri phenotype.

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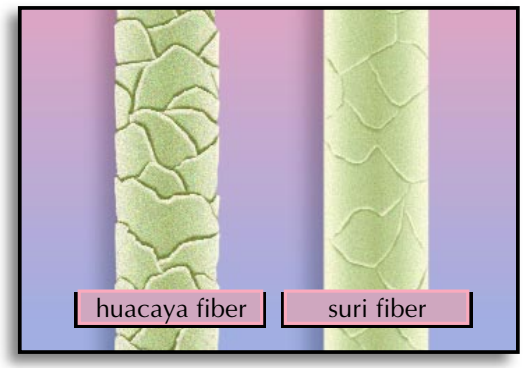
The straight suri fibers may normally be of a higher micron and may exhibit a higher deviation among the fibers than that of a huacaya fleece (so that extreme fineness is not a top priority to maintain the suri phenotype).

On the world market, the suri fleece is in high demand for its luster and hand (or softness) for the high fashion textile markets, and today commands a price double that for huacaya in purchase for crude fiber and for processed tops. Research data has shown that suri fleece may have a higher density and yield than does huacaya (Velarde et al 1987).

Luster in the suri fleece should be evident throughout from head to tail as this single factor alone contributes to the increased value and desirability of its silky fibers for use in the textile industry. The luster and softness of the fibers evolve from the smooth scale structure (cuticle) of the individual fibers which reflect the light and feel smooth to the touch.

These shiny, feathery individual locks when draping and swinging from the animal, elicit the transformation of elegance and aristocracy of the suri. The rarity within the world population of alpacas (approximately one to three percent) contributes to the mythical entity and encourages the efforts of those dedicated to the preservation of the pure, simple suri genotype and phenotype.



When magnified, the smooth characteristic trait of suri fiber compared to huacaya is easy to see.

The worldwide goal to maintain the pure suri fiber phenotype through pure genetic selection will aid in the dedication to the preservation of suris. ❖

Susan Tellez has been involved in the camelid industry more than 15 years as a consultant and has lifetime experience with all livestock. As a Judge and Training Instructor for ALSA and AOBA, she has provided background information to support the evaluation criteria for the Suri Network and the suri alpacas. 409-866-0247; sztellez@aol.com.