

An Interview with Eric Hoffman, Founder of ARI and AOBA

Where LLII Asks For Some History and Background

In the 1970s Eric Hoffman pioneered llama packing in the National Parks. In 1984 he entered the alpaca arena to market the first alpacas imported into the United States by Tom Hunt and Jurgen Schulz. He is the author of the Alpaca Registry Inc. (ARI) and served on its board for many years. He is also the founding two-term president of the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA). He was a primary organizer of screening which created a standard that has been accepted and used around the world. He has also been a contributor to Llama Life since its inception.

LLII: You've been involved with camelids for 30 years, in projects inside and outside North America. Speaking as an advocate for camelids what are the most positive developments you see?

EH: For wild camelids the conservation efforts in Peru, Argentina and Chile saving the vicuña from extinction is the single greatest accomplishment. These countries deserve a great deal of credit for their efforts. The vicuña is no longer on the verge of extinction and is recovering nicely. For domestic camelids their rapid dispersal all over the world is quite a phenomenon particularly the spread of alpacas.

LLII: Why did you write the Alpaca Registry, how was it created, and what impact has it had?

EH: The Alpaca Registry changed the rules and has created a world standard for an alpaca. My primary goal in writing the Alpaca Registry was to keep the alpaca population separate from the llama population in North America.

Chapter 27 in *The Complete Alpaca Book* covers this in detail. The only way to separate the two species unequivocally was to incorporate blood typing or DNA testing to verify that an offspring came from particular parents. The registry is really pretty simple. Only DNA verified offspring from registered parents were accepted. I also had hopes of using exact lineage verification to improve the alpaca in its fiber production

and rid it of genetic diseases such as choanal atresia. This group of a few hundred animals started a registry that has evolved into 45,000 animals today.

We need to be grateful to **Tom Hunt, Jurgen Schulz, Anthony Stachowski, and Phil Mizrahie**. Getting them to join the registry brought everyone else in. We started with about 95 percent compliance when we opened the registry on March 30, 1989. Today this is the largest population of alpacas in the world that can't be crossed with llamas. This is probably the single most important outcome thus far.

Other countries around the world have duplicated the registry for both llamas and alpacas, although their governances differ from ours. I worked with **Cecilia Penedo** at UC Davis, and **Susan Stackhouse** also read my initial drafts. The idea was to identify the population based on phenotype, and send a sample of their blood to UC Davis to establish a pedigree.

LLII: What do you mean by "world standard?"

EH: The ARI Board of Directors conscripted a group of us to devise an objective screening format, applicable to alpacas anywhere in the world. Much of the ARI Screening Manual, which I created, came from *The Alpaca Book* written by **Murray Fowler D.V.M.** and me. There was input from **Brad Smith, Karen Timm, Pat Long, Ty McConnell** and others. Our screening forms are now used around the world even though ARI quit screening animals in 1998. These forms offer a soundness exam, an acceptable adult height and weight, phenotype identifiers and a fiber standard that has been used on perhaps 15,000 exported alpacas bound for new homes far from their birthplaces. These forms also became the basis of stud certification in Australia.

LLII: Are you pleased with the development of the registry in recent years?

EH: There have been some positive developments, but much of what I see is shocking and should be of great concern to

all alpaca owners.

LLII: Can you give a few examples of what has changed?

EH: First let me describe the original intent of the registry. The original registry document was only five pages long. It is a concise and clear document that outlines an easy to understand registry where all members are treated the same and have a say through the vote on issues coming before the registry.

Equity and neutrality were the registry's original underpinnings. Keeping costs low and making registration as painless as possible to keep compliance high was of the utmost importance. The registry is voluntary so it had to make sense to small and large breeders alike and it had to accommodate the variety that exists in alpacas without being judgmental.

The vision was to keep the registry neutral to marketing pressures and provide a precise genealogical record for breeders to use in breeding decisions and their private promotional efforts. I thought of the registry as a stand-alone organization providing accurate, unbiased genealogical information, unencumbered with the additional responsibility, expense and politics of a breed association.

Equity was a paramount issue in the original design of the registry. I saw having all members able to vote on issues that mattered to them as a fundamental right. All alpacas were subjected to the same rules. It didn't matter what country they came from or if they came from a highly promoted herd. If the animal passed screening it moved on. If it flunked it didn't come to North America. The same rules for everyone, with objective, understandable criteria, made screening a success. The national herd benefited from the effort and the flow of alpacas was slowed as importers had to work hard to find animals that would qualify.

Equity also guided decisions of early ARI boards in determining how research grants were reviewed and funded with the creation of national reviewing organization, the **Alpaca Research Foundation (ARF)**.

There was also an emphasis on providing quality information with *The Alpaca Registry Journal*; a peer-reviewed science journal that was provided to the ARI membership for seven years. Contributors included scientists and experts from around the world. The idea was the better educated the membership was, the more informed their decision-making would be.

LLII: *Has that premise changed, and, if so, how?*

EH: Here's some of what has happened since: A two-tiered membership has replaced the original equity. We now have a poll tax. The board came up with this idea shortly after the merger of AOBA to ARI was turned down by the ARI membership. Critics of the board feel the tax was done to create an obstacle to depress voter turnout. If there is another attempt at merger, there will be fewer ARI members eligible to vote. The board had been pro merger. ARI announces voting registration and payment deadlines by mail, so people are notified. Once the registration deadline is passed, anything the board puts forth in that calendar year can only be voted on by those who registered.

I'll leave it up to the ARI board to explain why people need to pay to vote. If the rationale is for more revenue, the board could get even more money if they simply charged every member a surcharge to cover the process of elections. Regardless of the reason, making people pay has become an obstacle to more than 60 percent of people who could have voted under the original system. Why people don't register is probably no different than why people fail to register in the population at large: hopelessness, forgetfulness, ignorance, confusion and overload "The people running things will do what they want no matter what," is one explanation I often hear.

I phoned some local breeders in my area. Three out of eight thought they could vote even though they hadn't paid; one wanted to pay but was confused about when to do it; and one thought she could vote if she paid the fee before an important vote.

Presently, there are more than 5,000 owners in the registry but only 1,900 of these people can vote. A simple majority of paid voters is around 950, so less than 19 percent of the membership can constitute a majority. We now have two classes of membership. Voters and non-voters, and those in the second category are entirely at the mercy of the first. I see this as an erosion of one of the fundamental tenets of the original registry.

LLII: *What does "ARF" do?*

EH: Funding for alpaca research is another area that has changed radically from its original design. ARF was created to review grant proposals from researchers for research relating to alpacas. (See article on about -Paige get Pat Long- in this issue). The ARF board is made up of researchers and veterinarians who review proposals for quality of research and cost effectiveness. ARF often works with the highly respected Morris Animal Foundation in this process. In the world of science, peer review is the key to good research.

Researchers from around the world submit their proposals to ARF for consideration and funding. After ARF was formed, **David Anderson, DVM** of Ohio State University declared his own program **International Camelid Institute (ICI)** and has been allowed to solicit money directly from the AOBA membership. I don't doubt the good intentions in such an approach to collecting money, but it causes problems.

Scientists who are upset about this apparent incongruity have contacted me knowing I was one of the architects of ARF. My repeated requests for an explanation from the AOBA board as to why he is allowed to solicit money directly from the membership when the rest of the research community must go through a painstaking peer review process that scrutinizes scientific method and expenditures, have gone unanswered.

As important as any one university may appear to people new to the alpaca business, we should remember there are many universities that have been contributing significantly to alpaca and llama health who are not afforded the same access to sources of money.

LLII: *Where do members of ARI and AOBA get their information?*

EH: That's where I see a problem; the way the dissemination of information has changed. As I mentioned, from 1995 to 2001, *The Alpaca Registry Journal*, published science writing from highly qualified contributors from around the world. ARI members also received an informative newsletter. There was also *The A.O.B.A. Hummer*, an upbeat, informative newsletter edited by **Marsha Hobart** until 2003. The AOBA board recently abruptly terminated the Hummer. Today the alpaca community's information resources are *Alpacas Magazine*, featuring mostly full color farm ads and alpaca related articles that rarely address controversy.

The new publication, *One Voice* is seen by many in the ARI majority that turned down

the merger of ARI and AOBA, as evidence that both boards will continue to push merger despite the wishes of the community. At very least, the title would seem to embrace conformity and like-thinking over a desire to provide a forum for a respectful exploration of well-reasoned viewpoints.

Members of ARI need to ask themselves why publications with many voices were replaced by tightly controlled publications. There is an over emphasis on controlling what is reported.

This narrowing of the information base for the community also extends to the speakers and topics promoted in educational events sponsored by ARI. Ask yourself why diverse viewpoints on controversial subjects are not presented. Available information tends to only feature one viewpoint, or no information is given at all. This extends to fiber, genetics and research. In some cases, key figures are no longer invited to talk. Access to information about board decisions and procedures is not easily obtained. Take a look at the ARI web site and see if you can figure out what's going on. With vague reporting and the abundant use of Executive Session, it often becomes nearly impossible to know what is being discussed and the nature of the discussions.

In all democratic communities an open decision-making process, access to independent news sources, and equitable inclusion of differing points of view keep government healthy. ARI is no exception. Controlling information can avoid the truth.

LLII: *We have seen forwarded e-mails containing some hateful sounding accusations. We assume these are from an Internet chat site?*

EH: Yes. I am concerned that there has been no official sanction about the use of what has been called "trial by chat line" in the alpaca community. We see personal attacks, character assassination and libelous statements issued with numbing regularity. Often the people targeted to be discredited are political opponents of key power brokers. Often surrogates do the dirty work.

This sickening behavior is designed to intimidate people into being quiet. A price is paid for disagreeing. You can expect to be made to look incompetent, dishonest, or poorly informed. Why this is allowed and why no penalties are enacted on people who engage in mean-spirited attacks deserves an answer. Its overall impact is to ensure greater control through intimidation and to stifle dialogue.

LLII: *The changes you describe seem to show the political climate of ARI and AOBA has the chat line shaping the peoples' views....and you feel quite often the accuracy of the information is in question. Can you give me an example of how or why this has come about?*

EH: The issue of closure continues to be inaccurately reported. I've had closure described to me by people reading the chat line as a big fight with the victors saving the alpaca business from ruin by defeating special interest groups wanting to keep the registry open. To this day the "open registry" advocates are still attacked from time to time. The problem with this portrayal is that during the closure debate the issue of an open registry was not on the table. The issue was to allow 300 animals a year into the registry, or none at all. 300 animals hardly constitute unhindered open, importation. Here's what really happened:

In the United States the closure movement was led by a small group of well-organized advocates who deluged alpaca owners with weekly mailers and Internet messages, creating an atmosphere of hysteria. Their message was that the market was about to be overrun by imported animals. In fact, less than 800 animals were scheduled for importation in 1998. Murray Fowler DVM and I were conscripted to create a screening program by a registry board made up of **Mike Safley, Margaret Brewster, and Diane Long.** (In those days it was a three-person board.)

The screening program was seen as method of accomplishing three things: improving the quality of inbound animals, collecting a \$500 surcharge to pay for research and marketing, and slow the rate of importation. It was also believed to be legally defensible with regards to antitrust laws. Screening was the first attempt to slow imports by creating a difficult-to-meet standard for all inbound animals. It was believed screening was the severest restriction possible due to antitrust laws. Then came the closure issue.

There were two sides to the issue. An ARI board member initiated the closure referendum without formal discussion with other board members. The majority of the ARI board responded to the total closure referendum with an alternative proposal of allowing an annual import of 300 animals (around one percent of the registered population, which was roughly 30,000 animals in 1998).

The ARI board saw their counterproposal as an answer to genetic concerns (a viable breeding population didn't exist in certain colors) and concerns for monopolistic practices that we thought would follow closure. The board, and anyone speaking on their behalf, were cast as advocates of an "open registry" and a "special interest group," when in fact the debate was really about less than one percent of carefully selected new genetic material to enter the registry annually.

The "none at all, from anywhere," group prevailed and celebrated with cheers and high-fives at the 1998 AOBA conference where the voting results were announced. However, much to the surprise of some closure advocates, the closure initiative had been written in such a way that importers had ample time to get their animals into a closing market.

Approximately 3,000 imported alpacas were screened into the registry in the months following closure. It would have taken 10 years to achieve this number if the advocates for 300 imports a year had won instead of lost in the polls.

In telling this story the best part comes at the end. Some of the most outspoken and adamant proponents of the need to close the U.S. registry and market from imports quietly purchased many of the animals arriving after the closure initiative passed. When closure was finally enacted, leading closure advocates were in the strongest position to sell to the captive market they had just created, all the time claiming to protect the small breeder.

LLII: *Closure was five years ago. Aren't there more recent examples?*

EH: The closure issue marked the first time we saw all the components of today's U.S. alpaca political arena at work. The Alpaca Chat line where people could share ideas also had its bullies who took up their positions and have regularly attacked anyone perceived as a challenge to their view of the alpaca universe. As I mentioned earlier, demonizing those with a different viewpoint is standard fare. It doesn't seem to matter if the information used in the attacks is accurate or not; it often isn't. It's about creating doubt, and destroying someone's credibility. There seems to be a meanness about it. Membership clearly backed closure and this victory seems to have established the victor's methodology as a winning formula to control all future agendas.

Regardless of the issue, the pattern has become as predictable as it is nauseating. Victims have reported loss of sleep, depression, financial pressure, and being black-listed from educational and business forums. The methodology usually works. People resign or quit talking. Many have spouses who make them promise to never again enter alpaca politics.

The case known as the Interveners is a good, fairly recent example. The issue was that the AOBA membership majority voted for show rules that the 12 Interveners didn't like. The Interveners branded the AOBA board as ignorant, and worse, because they attempted to act on a majority vote. This escalated from threat to actual lawsuit. Their legal challenge attempted to overturn the will of the majority by claiming that it was necessary to have a majority of the entire membership vote in an election to make it valid, rather than have the vote be determined by a majority of the members who voted.

The vitriolic rhetoric hit new high notes. The AOBA president received hate mail and had to bring an attorney to board meetings to defend herself from her own board.

The first judge listened to both sides and identified the Interveners' effort as a "Frivolous Lawsuit;" in court parlance, "without merit." This would have been an opportune time for the Interveners to apologize or at least admit the people who'd been beaten up on were at least well-intended. Instead, they appealed, and a higher court has now sent the matter back to the lower court.

This has been declared a victory by some of the Interveners. I'm not sure if there were high fives this time or not, but this victory has some unexpected baggage that is still being unpacked. If the standard for a majority vote means more than 50 percent of the entire membership not just 50 percent of those who voted are required for all votes to be legal, what is the status of all previous ballots - including closure? There will be more to come, but to what end and to whose detriment?

I'm rambling. Rather than just listen to me you can get a grip on the paralysis caused by this kind of behavior by asking any of the following ARI or AOBA past board members what it has been like to serve in the post closure atmosphere: **Linda Mihnos, Rick Evans, Jim King, Phil Switzer, Chuck Stewart, Marie Pritchard, Julie Otis-Skinner, Tilly Dorsey, and Robbie Guidry.**

Their names appear here because they served, not because they necessarily want to talk about their experience. I'm not sure about what they will say, but there should be enough diversity in their views, to get a good perspective about what goes on.

(Editor's Note: There is a letter from Tilly Dorsey in this issue that outlines her views - see Letters page.)

LLII: *I know ARI isn't involved in shows, but there is talk about including show results in the registry. Do you think this a good or bad idea?*

EH: Shows results, as a permanent record may be a registry breaker. The registry's credibility is based on science, not marketing. Shows are not science, and aren't as precise as a soundness exam or other kinds of examinations in which objective data is collected on an animal. Shows can be fun but are basically marketing opportunities based on a judge's opinion. I know of many people dissatisfied with shows for various reasons. They have withdrawn and politely go about their business. Plenty of these breeders have very good animals and would view show results in the registry as undermining the registries credibility, neutrality and equity.

In *The Complete Alpaca Book* 75 percent of the breeders polled with more than 10 years experience felt there were problems of conflict of interest between show judges and exhibitors. I think including show results would be a can of worms that would create two classes of animals by including a system that has questionable credibility.

LLII: *I saw an e-mail from David TenHulzens to the membership about losing his position on the show committee and his experiences since then. What is your view of that.*

EH: David had every right to be discouraged and upset. He is an honest person and had the best of intentions. He experienced what many others have experienced via the information-altering Alpaca Chat line, only unlike others he had the guts to share his feelings and deal with the consequences. I believe the dismantling of the show committee David was part of was significant for a reason not often mentioned. The committee David was on was the first AOBAs Show Committee to address conflict of interest in a substantial way. Their loss is

a step backwards.

LLII: *The ARI board has announced it is pulling out from the ILR and placing the registry with an entirely new company in West Virginia. This is a major change and there have many others in recent years. What are your thoughts on the changes?*

EH: I'm not close to all the decisions and why they were made. Moving the registry is definitely a major event that could have long-term consequences depending on how smoothly it goes. I hope the directors and the new people both understand all the nuances and the incredible amount of personal attention to owners' inquiries that is necessary to run the registry. It is not an easy job. Much of what goes on requires patience and a lot of phone time. I know that ARI's relationship with the ILR was beneficial because having both the llama registry and ARI in the same building with overlapping personnel cut costs.

I was told that the ILR came in second in the bidding process to the new company. There were six or seven companies involved. I hope, for the sake of alpaca owners, that difference between the second and first place bid is substantial enough to justify the change. I know the registry was in good hands in Montana with the ILR. We'll know within a year if the move was a good or bad one.

There have been many other rapid changes since 2000. The ARI attorney was replaced. The one that had been there was very experienced in camelid matters. Also, the Alpaca Registry discontinued blood sample analysis with UC Davis. These are major changes.

On the AOBAs side, Marsha and Ken Hobert are gone after 17 years of dedicated service and the entire show committee was also dismissed. As I said before, *The Hummer* newsletter is gone and replaced with *One Voice*.

Change is part of life and not always a bad thing; but the important thing to remember is the registry worked just fine and Ken and Marsha Hobert and Dar Wassink worked as hard as they could for their respective organizations to make them run well. The obvious question is why have these changes been made and who is being served.

LLII: *What will you expect to come next?*

EH: It's hard to say. I notice AI and ET

are being pushed and kept in front of membership. When I wrote the original registry, AI and ET were not allowed and still aren't for several reasons. For one, the technology didn't exist. It will take a bylaw change to allow either technology to be introduced. These technologies have helped some livestock businesses and nearly destroyed others, depending on how well they are applied. With alpacas, not much is known about their genetic inheritance. It seems to me the genome project (see **Pat Long** article) should precede any serious discussion of AI and ET. There are plenty of models to study to justify it or to deny its use. The introduction of widespread dwarfism through use of these technologies is an example of premature introduction. Some sheep improvement plans are examples of positive use.

The introduction of these technologies changed the Quarter horse industry forever. A \$10,000,000 lawsuit resulted in decisions on AI and ET being dictated by the court. The Thoroughbred horse industry doesn't allow it. I'm sure there will be a debate on the subject. I also hear a lot of talk about a breed standard, which was turned down by the majority of AOBAs members voting in the election challenged by the "Interveners." What form this takes and who is hurt and who benefits needs to be carefully considered.

If a small group of people dictate the breed standard, control the show ring and what is rewarded there, are successful in having show results entered into the Registry data base and write the rules for which animals qualify for AI or ET control of the entire business will be complete - at least under the current structure. I think this would be a disaster for the small breeder.

LLII: *Your name is often mentioned as someone who can bring more sanity to the alpaca business. Do you have any plans to organize like-thinking people?*

EH: I've stayed out of alpaca politics for many years and don't enjoy it at all. I don't even like doing this interview but feel obligated to let people know that at least one person with experience in running things is seriously concerned about what is going on. I don't plan to lead the charge, if that's what you mean.

LLII: *Since 1998 you haven't been very involved with AOBAs, yet you are still active in other countries. What are you doing?*

EH: Actually, I spoke about fiber in

the 2002 AOBA fiber conference, but that has been my only recent involvement.

Since 1998 I have worked as either a screener or as a consultant for camelid and equine registries or groups in Europe, New Zealand and South America. *The Complete Alpaca Book* took three years to complete. Sherry (my wife) made it possible. I've also done some natural science writing outside of the camelid arena. Most recently I've been involved in a guanaco project that is really exciting.

I've enjoyed my time abroad; I think of developing the alpaca as an international undertaking. I have learned a lot in working with camelids over the past 30 years and I am able to share what we've done right as well as what we've done wrong when I am working with new groups. It is a pursuit I continue to find exciting and challenging.

My goal for the long haul is to breed and improve the alpaca until it is competitive with cashmere in low microns. There is much to be done. Only about 10 percent of the alpaca fiber produced on an annual basis is classified as baby. In the entire world on annual basis only 5,000 tons are produced. This is such small amount it doesn't make sense not to think of an international effort to improve the alpaca. If fiber is a focus there needs to be a coordinated effort, not a series of fiefdoms disconnected from the whole. I'm interested in improving alpacas through the development of registries. I'm also interested in helping alpaca growers in the Andean countries enjoy a better market for their animals.

I'm lucky to have stumbled onto camelids. I enjoy these wonderful animals as much now as ever. I still have several llamas, and want to spend some time packing in the Sierras and the Alps. Camelids have taken me to some terrific parts of the world, and introduced me to some wonderful people. It's been a great adventure. ▲