

## Taking the Predator out of You

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I really wanted to call this article taking the U out of Predator, but as you will have seen, there isn't one, but I really like the title so I would be grateful if you could proceed as though there were.

Few people would disagree that humans are predators (although at an early evolutionary stage we were probably more like prey) and that alpacas and other camelids are prey animals. Camelids are peaceable ruminants who care for their offspring and other members of their herd. Whilst they may attack other animals who they see as a threat, they don't stalk them, kill them and eat them. Human beings, on the other hand, evolved onto two legs precisely so that they could be more efficient and successful hunters by using tools to capture and kill their prey.

Millennia of evolution have not changed these facts, and whilst most alpaca owners no longer need to hunt for their supper, we still experience many of the primitive driving forces caused by our predatory nature, shown in our love of shopping and our enjoyment of ball games.

We can also see the difference in our natures when we interact with our camelids. Our instinct is to get close to them and then hold them - basically to capture them. Most alpaca owners don't want to kill and eat their alpacas but they do want to be able hold, stroke and interact with them. What do the camelids want to do? To move away from us and return to being amongst their herd where they feel safer. Fear for a prey animal is a very useful emotion as it helps them run away to live another day. Our task, if we want them to be calm whilst we work with them, is to minimise their fear.

Once we recognise this prey/predator dichotomy we can examine our behaviour in relation to our camelids and give ourselves the option of improving our interactions with them. It is probably unrealistic to ask all of them to adapt to our behaviour as so much of their reactions are innate. To give you an example of this, when a camelid loses their balance they regain it as quickly as possible as if they lose balance they become more vulnerable to predators. They don't need to think, analyse or plan this - they just do it instinctively. In contrast when we see an alpaca standing conveniently in the corner of a pen or field, we don't *have* to grab it, although we might be very tempted! It is easier for us to modify our predator-like behaviour than for the alpacas to modify their self-preserving fear responses.

### Why bother?

The saying '*Violence begins where knowledge ends*' is attributed to Abraham Lincoln, and refers to the fact that violence and aggression arise in us when we don't know a better way to deal with a situation. This is particularly true in camelid handling. Very few of us grew up around a herd of alpacas and were lucky enough to have had an experienced stock person who showed us the 'tricks of the trade'. In fact, I found that in the many camelid training courses I have taught, some of the best (human) students were those who had worked with pigs. Pigs are large, strong and independently minded animals who should be handled with skill, patience and understanding. Equally, learning good alpaca handling skills makes handling them easier, more efficient, more fun and safer all round.

### I'm interested... tell me more....

I structure the courses I give on camelid handling and training around the concept of 'Turning down the HEAT'. We examine the factors that are present in every camelid/human interaction, and these are the;

- Human,
- Environment
- Alpaca(s) and the
- Tools and techniques used

Although I am unable to condense a two-three day course into one article, I propose in this article to examine the primary predator/prey equations in each of these areas to see if we can recognise and modify our behaviour in order to make our interactions a little calmer and easier.

## ***H is for Human***

*Herding....* when you herd your alpacas is this as calm and organised as it can be? Or is there sometimes a touch of predator like behaviour? Shouting, waving, chasing, running and any behaviour that creates panic in your herd is going to make them see us as predators. Equally, if we pounce on them and grab them in the field or the field shelter they are going to lose trust in us and next time they won't allow us to get as close. Cria get very wise to this very quickly, and soon we have a herd of alpacas that runs away from us when we go into the field, rather than towards us which is what we would like. We recommend using a herding tape and herding wands (or poles) and walking calmly towards them, allowing them to go into a smaller area where we can work with them.

### *Herding eats camelids*



Once your alpacas are in a smaller area (we recommend catch pens which can be 5ft x 5ft to 8ft x 8ft (1.5m to 2.5m)) cornering and grabbing them is going to cause them to jump out/tunnel out/ scale the sides of the pen. Probably the most important thing we can do with ourselves when working with our alpaca is to consider our *body position*. I have worked with, trained, owned and bred a number of species and it is true of all of them - where you stand is really important in terms of being able to handle them.

This applies to if you want your alpaca not to move, or if you want it to move in a particular direction. Back to my pig handlers - if you want to stop a pig moving in a certain direction where you stand with your pig board really matters!

It matters because prey animals need an escape route. In order to feel safe and to calmly participate in whatever we need to do with them, they need to know that if they decide to move - they can. However, unfortunately, we usually feel that we need to stop them from moving (a predator thing...) so we stand right by their head and grasp their neck. We often stand in the the worst place to do this, which is in front of them, so that we are standing right in their escape route.

This makes them want to move to one side of us or the other to regain sight of their escape route. We then think they are struggling so we hold on harder. If we just chose instead to approach them from behind the eye from the side, they could maintain their escape route. They would struggle less and we wouldn't have to hold as hard or grip as tightly.

Quite often just allowing them to have an escape route allows them to settle down, become calmer and be easier to handle. In summary to offer them an escape route;

- face the same way as your alpaca,
- try to be more side on than face on towards them, and
- get behind their eye
- breathe!

We can use our newly discovered body position to use a technique called the midline catch. With this technique our hands don't need to go past the midline - thus avoiding the 'grab' and triggering their prey response



*The midline catch*



The second area I would like to examine is how we ask them to stand still. No animal - the human kind or otherwise - likes to be grabbed and restrained, particularly around the neck. So we struggle and they struggle. Their prey nature means that they instinctively believe that their lives are at stake and over time their behaviour may escalate making them very difficult to handle indeed, whilst others may develop 'learned helplessness' and shut down. Neither outcome gives us animals who are relaxed, cooperative and ready to learn.

Once we have a gentle hand on their neck we use a technique called the bracelet to ask them to stand still.

*The Bracelet.*



***E is for Environment.*** Where we handle our animals is also important. Try not to use your field shelter as a place to handle them. It is tempting because it is undercover and dry but it has 4 dark corners with no escape route and your alpacas are going to feel trapped being in there with you. I am also not that keen on stables as training facilities as alpacas usually feel too enclosed and may be unable to see the rest of the herd as stable gratings are too high. My suggestion is to set up some catch pens made out of sheep hurdles or alpaca hurdles outside and handle your animals in there. I feed mine there every morning and if I need to handle them, for example, to give them an injection or cut out a bramble from their fleece I simply close the door on the pen, give them time to finish their breakfast and do the necessary task. Because I am careful to give them an escape route (see above) and I don't grab and hold them, they don't jump out and we finish the tasks quickly and easily and usually single handedly. I teach regularly in Scandinavia where most alpacas are brought into the barn during the winter. Setting up catch pens in the barns works well as when you need to work with specific animals they can be herded into handling pens set up within the barns, but the animals don't feel apart from the herd who are still around them.

*Catch pens inside my barn...*



*and outside it...*



Having the correct facilities can also include ensuring that you have an area which you can use as a long, narrow aisleway for teaching leading. This sets both you and your alpaca up for success not failure. All animals, ourselves included, love routine and a safe, predictable environment. Barking dogs, noise and the presence of other species can all affect this. Eric Hoffman writes: *'Adhering to a feeding schedule and calm, quiet human interventions during feeding, visiting, catching and veterinary work (also) serves to reduce stress'*. Source: *The Complete Alpaca Book*.

***A is for Alpaca.*** Another important component of the environment is the presence of other alpacas. Our alpacas are herd animals - no matter how many you have of them. They all feel safer when surrounded by their own kind, so in order to keep them calm put them in a pen with others. You can use a crowded pen to your advantage to help you inject them in a calm manner. You can walk amongst them, allowing them to move (but not too far as you are in a small pen filled with alpacas...), lean over and inject them subcutaneously by pulling out the fleece away from the body around the shoulder area and inject into the skin fold that is formed. We use the opposite side from us as if they move away from the needle they move into us. If they move forward, it doesn't matter as we can move with them.

*Easy injecting*



*Proximity and contact.* Alpacas are largely a non-contact species. They don't lick their cria when they are born and they don't mutually groom like some other species. When one comes too close to another they will often give a warning spit or a little kick. Humans, on the other hand, are descended from monkeys and are comfortable with many forms of contact. Here again, camelid culture ought to inform us that getting too close to our animals when handling them and insisting on touching and cuddling them is going to worry them. On my courses we teach Tellington Touch which they positively enjoy. In order to overcome alpacas' antipathy to our touching them, I think it is important to work with cria, appropriately and minimally, as this desensitises their innate reaction to us. I recommend resisting the temptation to pick cria up as this will only create fear of us in the long term.

*A is also for animal* which includes us... If we are relaxed in the pen with them and make an effort to bend our knees a little, to make sure we breath and exhale properly then we will be less tense and so will they. This phenomenon is known as *limbic resonance* and can make a significant difference to how our alpacas view us. If we are relaxed, exhaling and calm we are unlikely to be a predator. If our muscles are tensed, we are holding our breath and being stressed, we seem to them to be more dangerous.

Knowing how our behaviour affects our alpacas and beginning to realise that they are not being simply 'stupid', 'stubborn or 'difficult' allows us to start to watch them and recognise the signs of stress. For example; droopy bottom eyelids, ears going backwards, an increased respiration rate, rapid movements around the pen, kicking and spitting all suggest we need to back off and stop doing what we are doing until we can find a better way to achieve our aims. When they become *your* teacher, you may be surprised at how much you can learn.

Understanding the prey/predator dynamic can also help us with toe nail trimming, a task which probably comes very low on the list of most alpaca owners favourite husbandry tasks. The problem stems from what seems to be to us a reasonable need to pick up the feet to do the nails. However, from an alpaca point of view, you are modelling a predator-like behaviour and they panic. Many predators 'trip up' their prey by biting at their lower legs in order to throw them off balance. Once the prey is down - the predator can finish them off. Getting back into balance when they feel out of balance is a priority for alpacas, but we rarely let them in our haste to 'get the job done'. This can lead to rearing or cushioning behaviours which can be difficult to eradicate once started. Instead, I make sure my alpacas are in balance, either using the bracelet or the halter helper or they are standing in a smaller area such as an Easy-Pen or a mini-pen, surrounded by other alpacas, and I do their toenails on the ground. If you have the luxury of help and a second pair of hands, ensure that both of you work on the same side of the animal, as alpacas hate to be an alpaca sandwich!

*Working on the same side*



**T is for tools and techniques.** In 1966 Abraham Maslow said, *“I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a **hammer**, to treat everything as if it were a nail”*. This means that if we only have the one technique for handling we will use it for everything... even when it is inappropriate. There are so many additional tools and techniques that you are limited only by your imagination.

There are many techniques for dialling down our predator-like behaviour and replacing it with something which is more alpaca friendly. Catch pens and mini-pens are an example of containing but not restraining them. The midline catch, the bracelet and the halter helper are all techniques for helping your alpaca stay in balance. We can show them that having their toenails nipped on the ground and giving restraint free injections means that we don't have to grab and hold them anymore. We can use additional equipment such as long lead ropes to give more distance between us and them and more of an escape route, and learn new skills such as learning how to catch very nervous alpacas at a distance using a 'wand' and a catch rope. Clicker training and positive reinforcement are also very effective in changing the prey/predator dynamic. During recent TB testing at my farm I had to use a crush for some newly arrived, nervous, rescued llamas. We trained them to go into the crush and have the straps put onto their headcollars using positive reinforcement. It took only a few minutes every other day over a two week period, but now they go in every time we need them to.

There are many, many more techniques which are all based on the 'Golden Rules' of alpaca training. These are:

- Containment not restraint - use small pens,
- Company of other alpacas - never separate an alpaca from the herd
- Escape Route - watch your body position relative to the alpaca, and
- Balance. Keep our alpaca in balance - don't pull it out of balance by hanging onto its neck or lifting its legs in such a way to cause it to lose balance.

I hope I have given you a little insight into 'camelid culture' allowing you to understand why camelids can be difficult to handle at times. Once we understand them, and change our behaviour accordingly (and consistently!) they very quickly realise that things have changed and they no longer have to fear us.

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[www.carthveanalpacas.com](http://www.carthveanalpacas.com) or by emailing [taylor.browne@clara.net](mailto:taylor.browne@clara.net).