

Camelids in Australia



Ideas for exploring the environment, in the 2024 International Year of Camelids by Jeanie Clark

Did you look at the photo above and think, 'What long necks those sheep have?' But they are not sheep! They are a camelid, happily grazing south of the Great Dividing Range, near Melbourne. Have you noticed any in your travels this year? You'll find them in some zoos, as well as on farms.

This article will explore camelids in Australia as part of the *International Year of Camelids* (IYC2024) aim for the general public to "learn more about and better understand camelids and their cultural, social and economic importance, particularly for Indigenous Peoples and local communities." [1, 2]. ([X] contains weblinks listed at this article's end.)



Logo used with IYC 2024 permission.

Enviroed4all supports the International Year of Camelids 2024.

What camelids do your learners know are in Australia? The choices were identified in the first article in this series [3]. There is no single webpage or website which gives an answer to this, but Figure 1 (right) is an opportunity for visual literacy, and a research prompt [4]. Learners should look at the title, images, and colours first. (For a larger version, use weblink [4] directly.)



The big camelid migrants to Australia

In what colour is Australia outlined? Is it also used for other countries? If so, which ones? What else is in that colour? (Notice the arrows linked to the Camelids?) Learners could put together

red outlined countries with arrows from the Arabian Camel (with its one hump, i.e. the dromedary) to conclude that dromedaries live in Australia, and that they came from northern Africa and the Middle East. Did they already know of this history? Does Figure 1 suggest that there are other camelids in Australia, like those shown in the header photo?

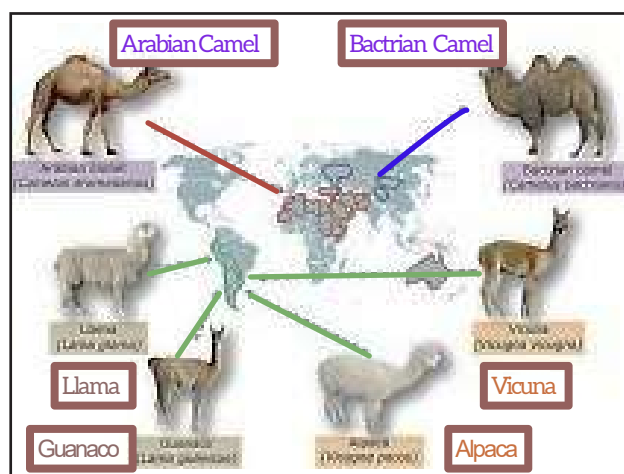


Figure 1: A schematic classification and map distribution of members of the camelidae family [4].

Let's explore the other camelids first. What is here? For how long? And why are they here?



Where are the two-humped camels?

Do you see two-humped camels in images of the camel herds of the outback? If not, why not? Learners could use Figure 1 to identify the source of these camels and consider any problem they may have here. There was a discussion of this on *Zoochat* [5]. It was commented that only 20 Bactrian

camels were imported into Australia. Being a native of cold deserts, they were unsuited to our heat. Further, if any did survive to breed, with one-humped camels as the only breeding partner option, a one-humped camel would be the result. Hence none are here now.



Not farmed, nor wild, in Australia?

Can your learners guess which of the four South

American camelids are not in Australia? (Perhaps because their names are unfamiliar?) Animal Australia Health reports that (the wild) guanacos and vicunas are not farmed here [6]. But ZooChat reports that some guanacos were brought to Taronga Zoo in the 1940s, then passed on to other zoos, but by 2021 the breed was down to one possible male [7]. Vicunas are a threatened species and not allowed to be exported elsewhere.

The *Dictionary of Sydney* tells the story of the (domesticated) llamas and alpacas that were first brought to Australia in the late 1850s [8]. Despite its messy start, this article is quite interesting with some unique 19th-century images. It could be used for comprehension, with questions like: In 1803, who was recorded as being first to have the idea of farming llamas and alpacas in the young New South Wales colony? Why couldn't these animals be easily bought and brought here, like sheep could? Who was the adventurer/ smuggler who eventually did get a herd out of Peru to the United States in 1858? What route did he use? How long did that take? How many arrived in Australia in 1858? How big was the full flock once landed in Sydney? Where were they sent to be farmed? What was the big problem that led to the flock being broken up and this farming venture unsuccessful?



Second biggest herd in a country – to Peru's number 1!

It was 1989 before alpacas next arrived for farming in Australia. They adapted well, and by 2023 the herd size was almost 400,000 – second only to Peru in herd size by country [9].

Why would your learners think that, from Governor King to the adventurer/smuggler Ledger to the farmers of today, these animals, native to the cold high Andes, might be worth bringing to our

flatter, hotter Australia to farm? The *Australian Alpaca Association* gives these reasons: fibre, genetics, and meat [10]. In 2022, Australian alpaca wool went to China, Canada, England, and New Zealand, indicating their success here [11].

An example of the story of an alpaca farm is given in *Sharp's Storybook Alpacas* [12]. This is a unique history of the challenges and joys of the development of an alpaca farm in the Southern Highlands (New South Wales) - the region where the alpacas had been sent in the 1850s.

Some alpaca farmers have added tourism to the value of their herds, with farm shops, visits and accommodation, e.g. *Ewe Nique Hobby Farm* and *Mysteria Alpacas* near Ipswich (Queensland), *Animal Land Children's Farm* (Diggers Rest, near Melbourne), *Ripples 'n' Tonic Farm* (Ventnor, Phillip Island) and *Rosehaven Farms* (Laharum, near the Grampians/Gariwerd) [13/14]. Alpacas can also be seen at some zoos, e.g. at Gumbuya Park, Ballarat Wildlife Park and Halls Gap Zoo.



I'm bigger and a great friend!

Are your learners aware of differences between

llamas and alpacas? AZ Animals gives five main differences [15]. Llamas are bigger than alpacas and useful pack animals. Llamas produce a coarse wool, compared with the finer alpaca wool.

Given these different key uses, would your learners expect more or fewer llamas than alpacas here? The number is hard to estimate, but thought to be about 12,000 llamas in 2019 [16]. In 2024, the first llama import in a couple of decades has just arrived [17].

Llamas were domesticated over 4000 years ago and were traditionally used for carrying goods, for meat, wool, shelter material (from hides), fuel (from their manure in pellets) and as offerings to ancient gods [18]. Today in Australia, *Llovely Banks Llamas* (near Geelong) drops the last three uses off this list and adds companion animals, livestock guardians, showing and tourism as modern uses [19]. There is a good story to read by Kingbilli farmers (near Geelong) about their choice of llama farming [20].

Where can learners meet llamas? Look for llama farm tours on the web, e.g. at the Visit Victoria website already cited. *Hanging Rock Llama Treks* (Woodend, Macedon Ranges) has farm tours, short walks and day walks with llamas [21]. *White Stone Llamas* (near Ballarat) takes llamas to the local show at Clunes [22]. *Painted Pines Llamas* (Lyndoch,

Barossa) not only has farm tours, but also llama walks, picnics, weddings and education, stating that though they began in the year 2000 with alpacas, they now have the 'superior' llamas! [23]. The National Zoo (Canberra) has two llamas [24].



What about the big ships of the desert?

So that leaves the big 'ships of the desert' roaming the outback in

huge herds, making us the country with the largest wild herd of dromedaries in the world! The 2021 estimate was of 1,000,000 feral camels increasing at 8% per annum. [25]. A good maths activity would be to take these numbers and apply the 8% increase nine times to see the herd size by 2030 with no

culling. Their meat is exported to the Middle East. Australia has camel farms too.

Why were dromedary camels brought here? As in their homelands, camels provide transport in dry regions. Camels and their handlers, especially Afghans, were brought here as the outback was explored and colonised. But as cars and trucks replaced them, they were set free, and so became feral. (The camel's story will be in the next article.)

Wow! What a range of camelids living in Australia! Their cultural, social and economic importance here differs from the Indigenous communities from which they came. Grazing on Australian farms, alpacas and llamas are creating a new textiles-clothing, tourism and recreation culture, with its own social and economic values. Tempted to visit?

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Links to websites and webpages in this article

- [1] FAO, International Year of Camelids, (2024) at <https://www.fao.org/camelids-2024/en>
- [2] FAO, International Year of Camelids, (2024) 'Take action – What can we all do?' at <https://www.fao.org/camelids-2024/take-action/en>
- [3] Clark, J. 2024, 'Introducing Camelids' in Otherways, vol 179, pp 45-47 from <https://home-ed.vic.edu.au/product/179-otherways/>
- [4] Ali, Haifaa & Al-Abedi, Sema. (2022). Figure 1 'a schematic classification and map distribution of members of the camelidae family'. in 'Bacterial Isolation and Identification from Feces of Healthy Camel in Mosul Province' in the Basrah Journal of Veterinary Research. 2022, 21(01):60-68. Online at https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figure-1-Shown-a-schematic-classification-and-map-distribution-of-members-of-the_fig1_360725890
- [5] Mr J. (2011) reply #4 in 'Are there any Bactrian camels in captivity in Australia?' in ZooChat at <https://www.zoochat.com/community/threads/are-there-any-bactrian-camels-in-captivity-in-australia.321712/>
- [6] Animal Health Australia, 2023, NLIST for various species at <https://animalhealthaustralia.com.au/nlis-for-various-species/>
- [7] Akasha (2021) reply #468 to Chilidonas (2015) reply#1 in 'Exotic animals in Australian zoos' in ZooChat at <https://www.zoochat.com/community/threads/exotic-mammals-in-australian-zoos.415741/page-24#post-1313467>
- [8] Franks, R. 2020, 'The Dramas of Llamas' in the Dictionary of Sydney on-line at https://dictionaryofsydney.org/blog/a_drama_of_llamas
- [9] Cole, H. 2023. 'Baby alpacas aplenty with stud owners overjoyed by perfect conditions for breeding' in ABC Rural, online at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2023-05-04/alpaca-population-reaches-400-000-record-breeding-season/102295882>
- [10] Australian Alpaca Association, 2022, Research and Development Strategy 20122-2024, page 2 on line at https://alpaca.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/AAA-Research-and-Industry-Development-Strategy_final.pdf
- [11] Cole, H. 2023. 'Alpaca Farmer declares industry viable after record exports' in ABC Rural, online at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2023-01-27/alpaca-farmer-declares-industry-viable-after-record-exports/101886760>
- [12] Sharp, M. 2022. 'Storybook Alpacas' in the Scrutineer VI online at <https://michaelreidsouthernhighlands.com.au/the-scrutineer/scrutineer-vi/>
- [13] Staff writer, 2024. 'Discover Ipswich - Celebrate year of the camelid!' online at <https://www.discoveripswich.com.au/celebrate-year-of-the-camelid/>
- [14] Visit Victoria, 'Melbourne every bit different – Llama and Alpaca Experiences' online at <https://www.visitmelbourne.com/features/llama-and-alpaca-experiences>
- [15] Croft, A. 2024. 'Llamas vs Alpacas – The 5 Main Differences Explained' in AZ Animals online at <https://a-z-animals.com/blog/llamas-vs-alpacas-the-5-main-differences-explained/>
- [16] Terry, M, 2024. 'Exploring the presence and significance of Llamas in Australia?' in PetShun online at <https://petshun.com/article/are-llamas-in-australia>
- [17] Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2024. 'Llamas quarantine journey expands local gene pool' online at <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/about/news/llamas-gene-pool-expands>
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- [22] Markham, D., 2018 White Stone Farm 'Llamas' online at <https://whitestonefarm.com.au/llamas/>
- [23] Semmler, M. 2024 Painted Pines Llamas 'Farm tours, weddings, party hire, llama walks' online at <https://www.paintedpinesllamas.com.au/farm-tours-weddings-party-hire-llama-walks/>
- [24] National Zoo and Aquarium, 2024. 'Llama' online at <https://nationalzoo.com.au/animal/llama/>
- [25] Sharp T (2012) NATSOP-CAM003 'National Standard Operating Procedure: Mustering of feral camels'. PestSmart online at <https://pestsmart.org.au/toolkit-resource/mustering-of-feral-camels>