


AlpacaCountry

By **Brooke Edwards**, Heifer International writer
Photos by **Dave Anderson**

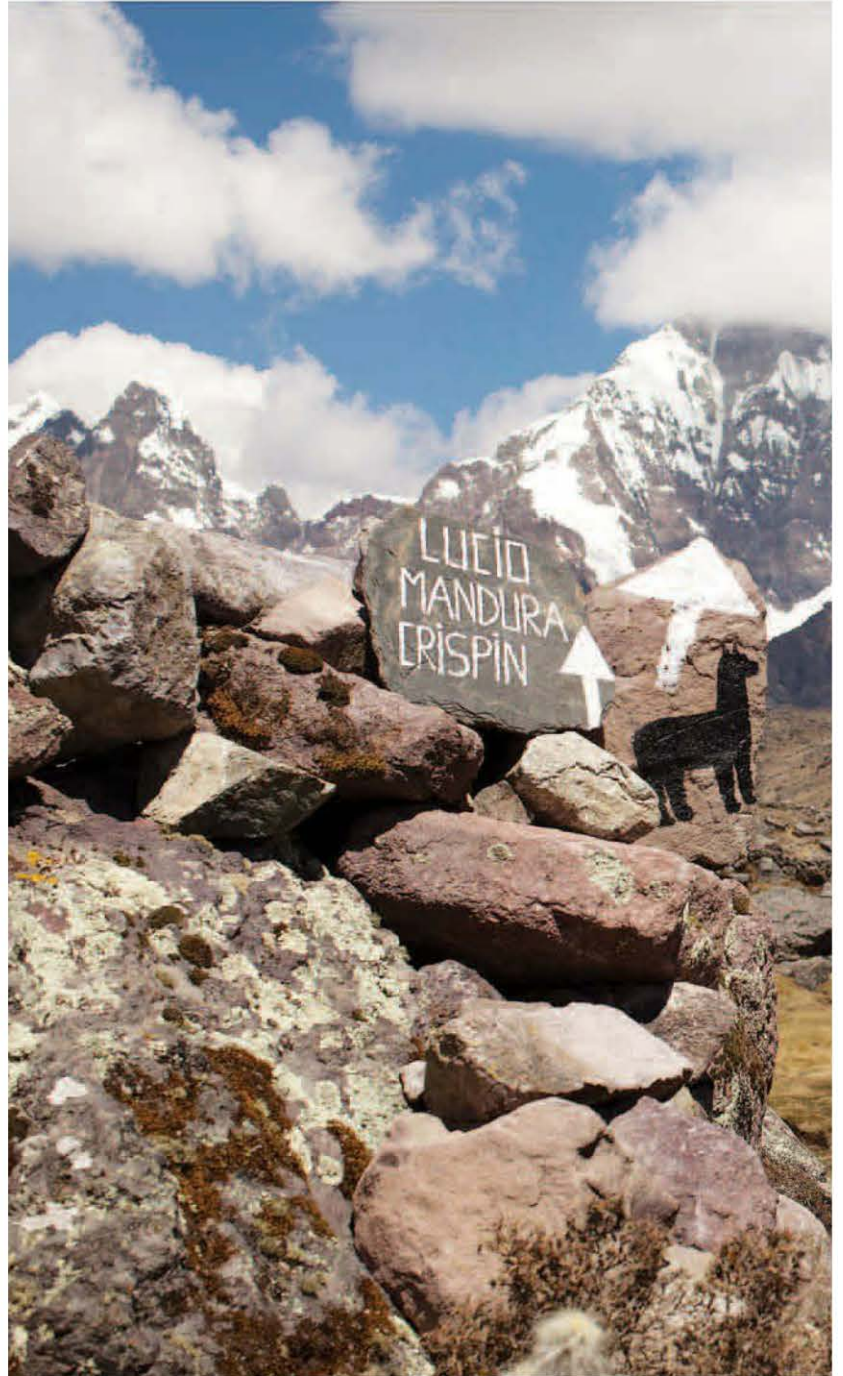


A photograph of a guanaco standing in a rocky, high-altitude landscape. The guanaco is in the foreground, looking towards the camera. The background shows a vast, rocky plain with distant mountains under a cloudy sky. The overall scene is a high-altitude Andean landscape.

In the Andean highlands of Peru, 13,000 feet above sea level...

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...very little can grow. The air is thin, the water scarce, the earth rocky and infertile. Against a backdrop of glacier-capped mountains, however, indigenous families survived since ancient Incan times by raising hearty alpacas. Climate change, severe deterioration of water sources and pasture, low incomes, low market value of alpaca varieties and little diversity of food in more recent times have made life here even more tenuous. Heifer International's Alpaca Biodiversity in High Andean Communities Project works in 22 indigenous, small-farming communities to reduce vulnerability to climate change and food insecurity of 4,333 alpaca-raising families.





Alpacas are gentle not only to their human caretakers but also on the land. They eat scrub vegetation other livestock won't eat, and their padded feet don't damage the fragile terrain. Their droppings help fertilize the topsoil, improving crops and reducing erosion. The exceptionally soft wool is collected without injuring the animal, providing Heifer families with fine material to make blankets, ponchos, hats and carpets.

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Three key factors prevent alpaca-raising families from earning higher incomes from the sale of their products: low genetic quality of the alpaca herds, low quality of the alpaca fiber and textiles due to poor quality control during shearing and processing and the use of intermediaries to sell their products.





As the alpaca wool industry flourished in Peru over the last century, alpaca farmers turned their focus away from the natural variability of alpaca colors to produce only white stock. White fiber is easier to dye, making it more valued on the commercial market. However, this practice resulted in a gradual loss of biodiversity and richness of the species and, therefore, a level of vulnerability to external commercial interests these indigenous families cannot afford. A more recent shift in smaller, local markets' preference for natural colors of wool has led to a resurgence in breeding alpacas in a variety of hues, which are in turn genetically more resilient and resistant to climate change.

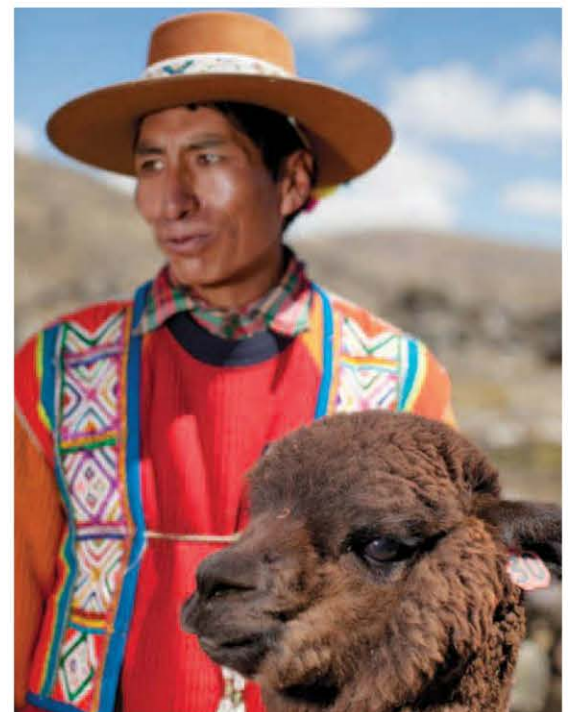
Artisan goods made with natural colors of wool sell for high prices to tourists. For a farmer to get a good price for the wool, however, the color must be uniform. Although adorable, this alpaca (at left) is of lower quality than desired, according to alpaca farmer Lucio Mandura Crispin. The reason? She has three distinct shades of fiber.

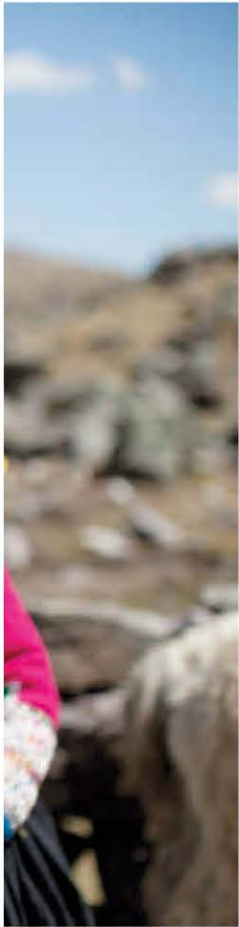
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Crispin learned techniques to improve the genetics of his livestock through training from Heifer International's Peru country program. Now, instead of depending on the sale of his alpacas' wool, his income comes largely from selling high-quality breeding stock, which can bring in as much as \$5,000 each.

Crispin, posing with one of his award-winning, solid-brown alpacas in his community of Fundo Tumpata, Pacchanta, says he loves his alpacas almost as much as he loves his wife.





So far, Crispin has won 150 awards for his alpacas' fiber color, quality and conformity. In addition to recognition, Crispin also received tools, irrigation supplies and veterinary products to improve his farm.

The successes of farmers like Crispin who raise quality breeding stock trickle down to the rest of the community. High-quality breeders yield offspring with high-quality wool, which can be sold raw at higher prices than before or woven into beautiful products for sale.