

ALPACA CULTURE

June 2018

Barns

The heart of rural life

Alpaca Boom!

Doubling the Australian herd

Alpacas Following Cattle on Pasture?



JOY REYNIEZ / JOY REYNIEZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Curious males steal the spotlight while Stacie Chavez uses the ATV in the background to traverse the enormous Sky Ridge Ranch.

Clearly, alpacas and cattle are entirely different animals – literally and figuratively. Their near opposite preferences for grazing beg the question: can they team up to maximize open range yield?

By allowing alpacas to browse after cattle have grazed, ranchers can maximize the available forage on a given tract of land while ensuring it is not overgrazed or damaged.

When cattle graze they move slowly across the field with their noses close to the ground. In fact, cattle spend a great deal of their time grazing, followed by ruminating and resting. As far as their preferences go, it is not known if they select plants to eat based on odor, but it is clear that they sniff constantly.

Conversely, alpacas are browsers and they naturally prefer to eat shorter grasses and mixed forage. They eat plants right down to the ground without a lot of damage to roots or the soil. They are famously efficient with the forage available to them, requiring fewer calories per pound to thrive because their digestive system so efficiently wrings nutrition from each blade of grass.

Stacie and Skip Chavez of Sky Ridge Alpacas in Tygh Valley, Oregon know what efficient eaters alpacas are. They have proven alpacas can survive and thrive most of the year on the open-range operation. You may have read about their alpacas in the March 2017 issue of *Alpaca Culture*, apparently happy and healthy, numbering in the

hundreds and going where they wish on 6,500 acre spread.

Lately, Sky Ridge has also been considering the possibility of using alpacas on land previously grazed by cattle and how partnerships between cattle and alpaca ranchers could be mutually beneficial.

The idea is still just a theory, but the win-win nature of the arrangement seems like it will work. “We have not hooked any cattle or other livestock growers to incorporate

alpacas as of yet,” Stacie says, meaning there are no definite transactions afoot. “The one hypothesis we have is that alpacas are more browsers than grazers and they eat different forage than cattle and sheep.”

Great minds appear to think alike, as the Chavezes had a recent visit from a local cattle rancher with a proposal.

“The rancher owns the property due west of us,” Stacie explains, “and wanted to offer his land as a grazing option for our alpacas. The only payment he asked for was to keep the fences in good repair.”

It seems the alpaca and cattle ranchers have some things in common; they want to make their operations as efficient as possible, keep cash flow steady, make practical use of what they’ve got and take cooperate with neighbors when they can. Could this be the beginning of another category of partnerships?

We want to hear from you. Email us at info@alpaca-culture.com and tell us what you think of this idea, or let us know what your experiences are.

SOURCES:

- Personal interview Stacie Chavez
- “Cattle: Vision and Other Special Senses.” *Animal Behaviour*, AnimalBehaviour.net, www.animalbehaviour.net/cattle/.
- Merrell, John and Susan. “Diversification.” *Sustainable Agriculture | Alpaca Farming*, Gateway Farm Alpacas, www.gatewayalpacas.com/alpaca-farming/sustainable-agriculture/diversification.htm.