

Handling Equipment and Facilities for Camelids and Llamas as Pack Animals

Our topics for this week are:

- Basic equipment and facilities for handling South American camelids
- Handling crias
- Packing with llamas

BASIC EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES

Catch Pens

Catch pens for camelids are small pens 10 X 30 ft, or smaller and at least 5 ft high. At least 2 or more camelids should be herded into a catch pen for ease of sorting and reduce anxiety of camelids separated from the main group.

Stocks

A restraint chute similar to a horse stock is advisable for ease of restraint of llamas. Alpacas respond better to loose restraint with a halter and lead rope. Camelid stocks are tall and narrow. If they are not constructed of anchored posts, stocks should be bolted to the floor to prevent it from being tipped over on its side. The size should be 2 ft wide, 5.5 feet long, and 45 inches to the top rail. There should be access to the camelid from all sides. A front and rear cinch attached to side rails is required to keep camelids from kushing in the stocks. Cinches should be 8 to 10 inches apart for llamas and closer for alpacas. A third cinch may be needed for some camelids to go over the withers to prevent rearing or jumping. Crosstie rings should be in forward positions to prevent the tied camelid from moving backward in the stocks. Quick release ties should be used if lower cinches are not used to prevent kushing.

MOVING AND SEPARATING

Camelids are extremely herd-oriented and are best moved as groups. Separation of individuals from the herd is done best by using a series of catch pens that gradually get smaller until an individual can be caught. Another method of separation involves two handlers holding a 30 to 40 ft rope about 3 feet off the ground to sort camelids. Blindfolds should not be used in an attempt to move camelids because they will kush.

RESTRAINT OF INDIVIDUAL CAMELIDS

Halters and Lead Ropes

Camelids can be taught to be haltered and led. This is basic training for llamas to be used as pack animals. They are principally handled from the left side and led from their left side. Camelid halters should be used to prevent pinching off their nostrils. Placing the halter is done with a bear hug approach as with haltering horses. Pony halters should not be used because the noseband is too low for camelids. The noseband should be at least 1½ inches above the end of

the bony part of the nose. At least 2 fingers should be able to be placed under the lower aspect of the band and the jaw so that it can chew. The cheekpieces should be at least 1 inch below the eyes. Halters should be removed when not handling the animal because of the risk of it catching on brush, fences, and other objects.

Handling Cria

Cria are handled similarly to foals by boxing in their movements with the handler's arms without squeezing them. Small crias can be flanked and laid in lateral recumbency or pressed against a solid wall as with sheep or goats.

If they kush in resistance, a handler can bend down on their knees and straddle their chest and hold the upper area of its neck. They can be kept in kush position by *chukkering*, using a folded loop of rope over the back in front of the pelvis with the ends of the loop around the fetlocks of the flexed hindlegs. This prevents them from being able to rise. In this position, another handler can perform jugular venipuncture or administer oral medications.

Cria should be handled for brief periods (less than 20 minutes) on a regular basis to gradually desensitize them to being haltered and led, loosely restrained, and have their legs and feet handled. This will prepare them for necessary toenail trimmings 3 to 4 times per year if their enclosures are not abrasive enough to wear the nails down.

LLAMAS AS PACK ANIMALS

Llamas can be excellent pack animals. Alpacas are not large and strong enough to be effective as a pack animal for anything other than the equivalent of a child's backpack.

Llamas should be trained for packing beginning at a year of age and led behind experienced older llamas while packing. Blankets or other soft, light weight objects should be carried during initial training. Less than 30 lb. should be carried until llamas are at least 3 years old. Adult llamas can carry up to 75 to 100 b. All pack llamas should be gradually conditioned prior to a long pack trip.

Adult, conditioned pack llamas carry their load on rigid or soft pack saddles made for llamas. A saddle pad or blanket is used under a rigid saddle. Rigid saddles are made of wood, aluminum, or fiberglass and held in place by two cinches. Rigid saddles are tent-shaped (crossbuck design) to allow the weight to be carried evenly on both sides of the upper chest without pressure on the top of the spine. Panniers are the detachable packs that are attached to saddles to carry the load. Soft pack saddles also distribute the load weight on both sides of the upper chest.

Pack saddles are placed on llamas in a similar manner to how riding saddles are put on horses. The llama should be brushed first. The saddle pad and saddle are placed just behind the shoulder blades and the front cinch is applied first and then the back cinch. Tightening the cinches should be gradual, done at three separate times. After the last tightening, the handler should still be able to get 3 fingers underneath both cinches.

If packing is intended in areas with steep slopes, a breast collar (strap that goes from each side of the saddle and around the front of the chest) to keep the load from shifting backward and a crupper (strap that goes from the saddle and under the tail) to keep the load from shifting forward will be needed. Neither should be so tight that fingers cannot be slipped underneath the

breast collar and crupper.

Each side of the pannier should be weighed to ensure an evenly distributed load. There should not be more than 2 lb. difference in weight between the two sides. The heaviest part of the pack should be closest to the llama's body to prevent the load from being top-heavy and shifting.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Camelid restraint stocks need cinches to prevent kushing.**
- 2. Camelids, like horses, should not wear halters when in pastures or pens.**
- 3. Crias should be restrained by blocking movements, not by squeezing their body.**
- 4. Llama should not carry more than a 30 lb pack before they are 3 years old.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.