

THE GERIATRIC LAMA – OWNER

This may be written by - **YOU!**

Lars Garrison

What do I want to happen when, for whatever reason, I am unable to care for my animals? The time comes – we are finite – when we can no longer care for our animals. Facing the ‘what then’ questions is a prime responsibility we each, as owners, carry.

Financial crisis, divorce, accident, death, incapacity, change in zoning law, or even a recent case where new owners of a property got the lamas as part of the purchase, and now know that they cannot cope with them. What do you want to happen to your lamas then?

In preparation for this talk, I discussed this with a number of owners; large and small herds, long time and new owners, attorneys, administrators, doctors and sales people - pretty much across the full spectrum of ownership possibilities. Three had a defined, written out, thought out, funded plan for their animals.

The underlying questions are really quite simple: who will take care of your animals, and how are they to be funded? Caring for your animals when you cannot: it can be anything from setting up a permanent retirement home to shipping them to an auction. Funding can be an insurance policy, a trust fund or asking the person who receives them to give them good care and pay for it.

None of the answers are written in stone – but all questions need to be answered or you have not properly cared for your lamas. Decide early on whether the lamas should be a part of your will or handled separately. Wills may not be probated for months or even years. You need someone who will provide the care you stipulate from day one, and the care must be funded in some manner. Usually items such as this are handled separately in ones’ estate.

Llama Association of North America has developed a ‘Next of Kin – Live Animal Alert.’ This is a card that each of us with animal responsibilities should carry with them at all times. It should be next to your driver’s license and health insurance card – where it will immediately be found in an emergency. Hospital staffs are trained to find essential information promptly. This card should be in the spot where they look first. The card tells whom to alert to your problem, and what kind of animals you have.

The person(s) named must be aware that you have named them, and be both capable and authorized to handle whatever situation may arise. They should have written authority and instructions for care, short and long term. They must have a means of identification for each animal. They must have, or have access to, the means to go forward – knowledge of the health care schedule; worming, shots, hay and grain suppliers, breeding status, ILR signature authority, AND a master plan on how to proceed.

If you wish your herd dispersed, it should be clearly outlined how this should be accomplished. Often partnership animals are given to the partner. A lama friend may have long wanted a particular animal. Fiber buyers will often want a couple of animals rather than lose their resource. Some want to sell animals at sales such as Celebrity. Others want to set up permanent care situations, which might include Montana Large Animal Sanctuary (which now has 540 lamas). Most simply want to know that good homes are found – dollars are not a part of the equation. Be aware that most herd dispersals today cost the owner money. They do not make money. Be prepared for this eventuality.

The designated manager/caregiver must know the quality and medical history of each animal: which females should be bred to which stud; which studs have the best genetics for given situations, etc. These questions require knowledge on the part of the receiver. If we know that we have significant life changes developing, we can take the time to educate. Accidents happen, a sudden financial crisis - we must be prepared. Every situation is different. Advance thoughtful preparation and coordination is the necessity, along with funding.

Too often, in the face of emergency, we are not capable of making good decisions. The nominated caregiver must be capable, and authorized to act in the owners stead. Your vet, grain and hay supplier, etc. must be aware that the person is acting with authority.

What about ILR documents? Who may sign in your absence? Are there documents, assignments and the like, that have to be filed? This has been well thought out. For example, if there are no surviving (or capable) owners of a herd, the designated caregiver can send in a copy of their death certificate and the document assigning the care giving responsibility. Alternatively, prior to the incidence, you may include the caregiver as a co-signatory. In this manner, even if you are not able to participate, someone may sign registrations and applications on your behalf. There are fees to make actual transfers of ownership. In my family, my parents made me a signatory on their bank accounts and safe deposit boxes. At the time of their death, I was able to carry on their wishes as if they were there. It was very comforting for them and me.

Let us go back to the question of dispersal for a moment, and more particularly the financial aspects. Many of us purchased our lamas for quite significant amounts of money. It seems that we should be able to sell them for a comparable amount. It is not so. Gayle and I sell around 50 lamas every year. People buy from us for two main reasons: 1) a broad selection – many to choose from, and 2) after market service – we will be there to answer questions and support them in time of need. In an auction or quick dispersal situation, neither of these buyer needs is covered. Significant value reduction! We offer free delivery; a caregiver may not be able to. We have a significant library of reference material collected since 1987 available to our buyers. Hard to replicate when the sign reads ‘going out of business.’

These factors diminish the commercial value of your llamas. Be realistic. Under the dispersal conditions money cannot be one of the issues! Finding good homes, insuring proper care, designating an appropriate care giver on an interim basis, establishing rules for dispersal, maintaining continuity of service to our animals – these must be our primary areas of focus. There may or may not be enough money involved to return something to the original kitty. It will, more than likely, cost money. Accept this in advance.

We have examined a number of possibilities for ourselves. Many of you know Scott Lapier who has worked with us for ten+ years. We have had several hundred llamas and alpacas, and over 200 buyers. Scott knows more about day to day llama care than most! We are almost 70. We recently completed the first year of a three-year program to reduce our herd from 125 to 40 or so. We currently own 79 llamas - a good deal of progress has been made. These factors lead us to where we are today.

We recently offered previous customers a two-for-one deal. If you bought one, we gave you a credit of that purchase price toward additional animals. It worked well. This method honored our ongoing commitment to our buyers. Then we reduced prices by about 35% across the board. That found a number of new owners.

These actions are all pointed toward lessening problems for our animals and two-leggeds when the time comes that we cannot properly care for them, either physically or financially. We intend for Scott to be our nominated caregiver. We will fund the care of our then herd so that he may care for it as his own. Our children live quite far away, and the income produced (if any) from dispersal would not support them for very long.

We are in the process of developing a plan to offer animals to those who have purchased from us in the past. We are not quite sure how this part of the story will end, but currently our discussion involves offering our animals to our customers – particularly those who have females to breed that will want the services of our studs. Scott himself is one of our buyers – he has about ten of our girls. Certainly, he will be high on the list.

A number of our remaining llamas are themselves geriatric – over 12 years old. They have been our friends for many years. We will treat them with the honor they deserve. They are too old to breed or sell. One has only three legs. About 20 are in this group. A special place must be found for them to live out their years in peace. A sanctuary may be our answer, but we understand that it doesn't work for everyone. We intend to fund their final home well enough that others may be cared for also.

I work with Hospice, very rewarding work. Clients can receive hospice care during the anticipated last six months. The single largest drawback to working with Hospice is that people do not wish to accept the fact of their short time to live. As a result, we see our friends for only a few weeks. We could do so much more for them and their families if we were given more time! Be timely. Make your decisions now; announce your decisions, act on them to the extent feasible. Do it. **NOW!** For your animals.