

This past July, I had the opportunity of working in Peru with Dr. Purdy, Dr. Diaz, and a team of students for the Nuñoa Project. Throughout our two weeks, we provided veterinary care for farming communities in the highlands of Pucará and Cusco with the intent of improving farmers' management practices. By working with these people, I have gained a first-hand account of the challenges and personal reward of international agriculture and veterinary medicine. The Nuñoa Project was an extremely humbling learning experience as we were able to serve not only animals, but also their caretakers.

All the alpacas we worked with had limited human handling, so it was important to work efficiently to prevent any unnecessary stress for the animals. We quickly learned how to perform pregnancy exams through abdominal ultrasounds, evaluate body condition scores, check for physical defects, and determine the age and sex of an alpaca within two minutes. Time was of the essence, as some days there were multiple farms to help and eighty or more alpacas to examine.

The most challenging aspect of this trip was emphasizing successful farming techniques through proper education. One of Dr. Purdy's goals is to teach farmers how to recognize health abnormalities, such as a male unfit for breeding. Since their main source of income is from alpaca fiber, our objective was to get farmers to use bigger males to breed, which will produce larger offspring with more fiber. Dr. Purdy has loaned out superior males to these farming communities to show them that our methods are effective. Unfortunately, many of these farmers are just trying to survive, and currently do not have the resources to separate their males from their females. Despite this setback, we expect to see higher pregnancy rates and alpacas with better fitness and fiber in the years to come.

I realized that in order for these farmers to trust us, it takes patience and constant exposure to our ideas. After seeing long-term results, I believe these farmers will have more incentive to practice better management. I now understand why Dr. Purdy devotes his time to travel and give back to these people twice a year; our help shows these farmers that we care and are committed to improving their livelihood.

Although it was physically and mentally demanding, I was happy waking up at five AM, driving up mountains, and hiking to these farms, as this was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. The views were breathtaking at an elevation of 14,000 feet, but more meaningful to me were the people that lived there every day. Getting to know these farmers and learning about their culture made everything worthwhile. I gained a deep respect for these people as they work extremely hard, yet never complain and are full of life. I am thankful to have met such wonderful people and work with a team of motivated and dedicated individuals.

Overall, my trip to Peru has positively changed my outlook on life and the veterinary profession. I have reaffirmed my aspirations of becoming a veterinarian and have learned that this career is much more than being a doctor for animals; it is a lifestyle devoted to helping those in need in our community. I have never considered a career in international agriculture, but my involvement with the Nuñoa Project pushes to me to come back to Peru as a veterinarian and help these farmers. With enough time, diligence, and support, I am confident we will make a difference in these farmers' lives.



