

The dollar a day dress

A BBC TV documentary which featured a section on the alpaca farmers of Peru. Here is a description of the documentary and a transcript of the feature on Alpaca Farming in Peru.

BBC One, Sunday, 6 March 2005, 22:15 GMT

Panorama travelled the world to create "The dollar a day dress" - a symbol of how the world trade system harms the poor. Reporter Steve Bradshaw travelled from the Sahara to the Andes to discover some of the harsh truths about free trade and its impact on the developing world.

In each country he collected fabrics for an outfit which symbolises the plight of the millions who live on less than a dollar a day - designed and made by a group of top London fashion students and modelled at London Fashion Week by Red Cap and former Eastenders star Tamzin Outhwaite.

In 2005 Britain will chair the G8 and try to lead the world in the fight against poverty. Many believe the best way to help is to ensure a free and liberal world trade system - so the poor can work their way to prosperity rather than relying on Western aid.

But Panorama's report argues that unregulated free trade may do more harm than good unless the rules of the game are changed to put the needs of poor countries first. On the journey Panorama discovered that

In Mali the famous Blue Men of the Sahara wear traditional cotton robes - but the country's impoverished cotton farms face unfair competition from subsidized American producers.

In Uganda markets are full of second-hand clothes donated to charities in the rich countries - clothes which are desperately needed but help prevent the textile industry recovering from the Idi Amin days.

In Peru alpaca farmers remain mired in poverty while the West fails to provide the technological help to rescue the industry from decline.

In Cambodia garment workers risk destitution as new trade rules threaten a Race to the Bottom over labour standards.

Production team:

Reporter: Steve Bradshaw

Producer: Huw Marks

Deputy Editors: Andrew Bell, Frank Simmonds

Editor: Mike Robinson

Transcript of Alpaca farming in Peru feature. Including quotes from Mike Safely of Northwest Alpacas.

BRADSHAW: The dollar a day dress was starting to take shape. Next – something more luxurious and a story that shows how hard it is for poor countries to make free trade work, even when they start with a unique natural advantage.

Our search took us to South America, to Peru and the Andes Mountains to meet the farmers who live on a dollar a day and the animals that could save them from poverty. This is the home of the Alpaca, their one big natural asset in the free trade world. It's wool prized by shoppers as a luxury if it's good quality. But too often it isn't. But a factory in the city of Arequipa they're sorting the good alpaca wool from the bad.

Alonso Burgos helps run a business that makes Alpaca clothes and textiles for the world market. There are some fleeces that arrive here of the fine and pure quality that shoppers want.

ALONSO BURGOS: Oh you can see the fantastic alpaca quality here. This is prime material. This is beautiful, very fine, this is the type of material I like to see all over.

BRADSHAW: But much of what he's sent by the poor alpaca breeders in the mountains is too coarse, and the colours muddled. Finding out what's gone wrong meant a journey to some of the highest inhabited regions of the planet where we came across a rare herd of wild vicuna, their fine hair even more prized than their alpaca relatives. The communities here have long depended on alpaca for a living. The alpaca trade could be a way out of poverty. But it's an opportunity that's being wasted. We drove past a heard of alpaca being sheared. Alonso showed us what was wrong.

Oh he's [alpaca] spitting.

ALONSO: This is your normal high Andean very low quality flock where there has been a lot of intermix between llamas and alpacas and the product of that is wariso type.

BRADSHAW: Hybrids.

ALONSO: Hybrids.

BRADSHAW: That means coarse, poor quality hair, or worse.

ALONSO: This poor little guy has pretty much all the defects that one could see in an Alpaca is a two coloured animal, and that means that when he's shorn at a bit later stage, both colours will intermix and that means contamination, and he has more toes than he should have, so this guy will have problems walking, running, going for his food, mating. I'm sorry, but.. not a very bright future for him.

BRADSHAW: Bad breeding technique.

ALONSO: Bad breeding technique.

BRADSHAW: Farmers here are starting to realise their stock is degraded, but they don't have the resources to do anything about it.

Are you making a good living out of this?

WOMAN: [Alonso translates] She just make a little bit, just enough to eat. If she could improve her flock, if she could only have enough money to buy a new breeding stud.

BRADSHAW: Do people around here have any help from the rich countries, international agencies helping to improve their flock?

WOMAN: No.

BRADSHAW: This is the top of the pass, it's about 5,000 metres which is a few hundred metres short of the altitude of Everest Base Camp. We were on our way to Pacomarka, Alonso's model alpaca ranch, as remote as it's tiny. Here Alonso showed us the world's first high altitude dating agency, exclusively for alpacas. Lady alpacas don't get to choose their partners, despite appearances, instead breeding partners are chosen scientifically to produce the fine hair that shoppers want. If other farmers bred alpacas like this they might avoid the dollar a day future. But this best practice has so far not been rolled out across the rest of under resourced, cash strapped Peru. What's needed is for the West to transfer resources and expertise to the developed world, as it's so often promised.

ALONSO BURGOS

Inca Group

If we don't get any extra money come in to Peru from outside sources, then efforts like the one we are doing here in Pacomarka will be too small to change things around and we will just go down hill as we are going right now.

BRADSHAW: So, with only a few true thoroughbreds around, a great global trading opportunity missed. Still, we couldn't resist showing off our find to the students back in London.

STUDENTS: Hi Steve.

BRADSHAW: [video phone] Hi can you hear me okay?

STUDENTS: Yes.

BRADSHAW: [video phone] I'm 4000 metres up here in the Andes Mountains in Peru and I'm bringing you back one of the finest textiles in the world and it comes from my friends these guys behind me. I'm just wondering if you have any idea what they are.

STUDENTS: Llamas? Goat?

BRADSHAW: [video phone] Goats! They're alpaca. Alpaca. Well I'm going to try and introduce you to one of my friends here. We at an alpaca wrangler to help us. This is a beautiful thoroughbred alpaca of the kind you don't often see in the Andes these days, big wide eyes like his camel relatives. He's got beautiful soft hair. We'll bring some of this back and you can judge for yourselves. Alright, great, well goodbye from the Andes and from Alpacaland.

So goodbye to Alonso's pedigree alpacas. What we were to hear next, how the rich countries are succeeding where Peru is failing. In the provincial capital Arequipa we met American alpaca breeder Mike Safley who says some of the best alpacas have been exported to the rich countries which can now use them to compete with Peru.

MIKE SAFLEY

United States Alpaca breeder

It's kind of like the genie is out of the bottle. They've gone to England, they've gone to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Italy.

BRADSHAW: Mike Safley uses breeding expertise unavailable to poor Andean farmers. He's trying to share it, but he too reckons more help is needed.

MIKE: .. some work with animal scientists that could show them how to select the best animals. Within a few generations we'd start to completely change the complexion or the quality of the herds that they're raising.

BRADSHAW: And what would that mean for their life?

MIKE: Oh it could mean double their income, maybe even triple their income if they could really produce the superior fibre.

BRADSHAW: Meantime Alonso's firm does export the fine alpaca when they can find it. Time to take some back. So we've decided to go for the blue alpaca and the red, and it's definitely the best stack I've found so far. We just hoped it would go down okay with the students – and it did.

STUDENT: It's really lovely, isn't it. It's beautiful. It's very kind of furry. You could actually make a teddy bear. (laughs)

BRADSHAW: The challenge, how to use luxury alpaca, which is still quite thick, in the dollar a day dress. The students' answer was simple – make a dollar a day jacket.

STUDENT: That would be nice for jacket material or...

STUDENTS: It would be really nice.

BRADSHAW: To check out their idea for the dollar a day dress or outfit the students went to the studio of Alice Shreeve and Hannah Coniam, the designers behind the Belle and Bunty label. They used to be London College of Fashion students themselves.

ALICE: So you've gone for a dress and a jacket for their catwalk show. Did you explore them using the pleats on different areas of the body and how that kind of affects in a woman's shape, silhouette?

BRADSHAW: They'd offered to showcase the dollar a day dress at a show during London Fashion week.

STUDENT: That really works, like pleating such a graphic print.

BRADSHAW: But time for a reality check. A dress made from fabrics we'd chosen was about to be premiered at a major fashion show in front of 300 people.

ALICE: Are you aware that you've got to take all angles of this outfit into account because the catwalk is incredibly unforgiving and everyone is going to be....

BRADSHAW: Almost there. But we wanted one more fabric, and this time from a country that's done what the West asked of it but still faces disaster. We're in a corner of South East Asia that's seen economies, even whole empires collapse before. In Cambodia history has a way of making anything seem like a passing fashion. At Angkor Watt, the monumental relics of a thousand year old lost civilisation overgrown by jungle. Kings and priests used to walk these corridors. We've come to find the unique material they wore.

Meet our new friends. These Cambodian works are unique. They exude a golden thread to make their cocoons, hoping to emerge as moths – in vain [batch frying in pan]. The thread is naturally golden silk, the only such kind in the world. There are other uses for the cocoons [edible] though not as profitable. Silk growers and weavers make again a dollar or two a day. We found the material we were looking for and sent it back to the students in London. The dollar a day dress finally revealed. It's Tamzin's last fitting before the big show.

TAMZIN: It fits much better now, thanks girls, well done.

BRADSHAW: The pleats and the colour clash have paid off. The alpaca has gone into the jacket. The rare Cambodian silk has gone into the lining. In just three days time our designers' efforts will be put to the test in a trial by catwalk.

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