The domestic sheep is the most common species of the sheep genus. They probably descend from the wild mouflon of south-central and south west Asia. Sheep breeders refer to female sheep as ewes, intact males as rams, castrated males as wethers, yearlings as hoggets, and younger sheep as lambs. In sheep husbandry, a group of sheep is called a flock or mob.

Sheep are ruminant animals. They have a four-chambered stomach, using the first chamber to store food (cud) which they then bring back into their mouths to chew again before fully digesting it. These grazing animals often prefer noxious weeds and plants, which makes them great environmentalists.

Sheep like to stick close to one another for comfort and security. Either black or white, these animals are incredibly gentle. Lambs form strong bonds with their mothers, but they have also been known to bond closely with humans.

Some breeds of sheep exhibit a strong flocking behavior. This was used as an example to Israelites in the Christian bible to instruct them to obey their shepherd. Flocking behavior is advantageous to non predatory animals; the strongest animals fight their way to the center of the flock which offers them great protection from predators. It can be disadvantageous when food sources are limited and sheep are almost as prone to overgrazing a pasture as goats. In Iceland, where sheep have no natural predators, and grasses grow slowly, none of the various breeds of sheep exhibit a strong flocking behavior.
Sheep flocking behavior is so prevalent in some English breeds that special names apply to the different roles sheep play in a flock. One calls a sheep that roams furthest away from the others an outlier, a term originally used to refer to someone who lives far from where they work. This sheep ventures further away from the safety of the flock to graze, due to a larger flight zone or a weakness that prevents it from obtaining enough forage when with the herd. Another sheep, the bellwether, leads the others. Traditionally this was a castrated Ram (or wether) with a bell hung off a string around its neck. The tendency to act as an outlier, bellwether or to fight for the middle of the flock stays with sheep throughout their adulthood; that is unless they have a scary experience which causes them to increase their flight zone.

WOOL:
Many people believe that shearing sheep helps animals who might otherwise be burdened with too much wool. But without human interference, sheep grow just enough wool to protect themselves from temperature extremes. The fleece provides effective insulation against both cold and heat.

Sadly, today, most wool comes from factory farms. With an estimated 148 million sheep, Australia produces eighty percent of all wool used worldwide. Flocks usually consist of thousands of sheep, and individual attention to their needs is virtually impossible. Just weeks after birth, lambs' ears are punched, their tails are chopped off, and males are castrated without anesthetic. Extremely high rates of mortality are considered "normal".

In Australia, the most commonly raised sheep are Merinos, specifically bred to have wrinkly skin (which means more wool per animal). This unnatural overload of wool causes animals to die of heat exhaustion during hot months, and the wrinkles also collect urine and moisture. Attracted to the moisture, flies lay eggs in the folds of skin. To prevent "flystrike," Australian ranchers carve huge strips of skin off the backs of unanesthetized lambs' legs. This is done to cause smooth, scarred skin that won't harbor fly eggs.

Aging sheep are subjected to "tooth-grinding," an unanesthetized procedure that sheep farmers claim reduces tooth loss and extends the sheep's productive life. A battery-operated grinder is used to wear down the teeth. Another method involves using the edge of a disc cutter to cut right through the teeth near the level of the gums.

Faced with such vast amounts of death and disease, the rational step would be to reduce the numbers of sheep so as to maintain the existing ones decently. Instead, sheep are forced to bear more lambs by the administration of drugs.

Like other "commodities," animals can fall victim to fluctuations in the economy. In 1990, 10 million Australian sheep were shot and buried in mass graves when they became practically valueless due to a lingering drought and low wool prices.

Sheep are sheared each spring, after lambing, just before they would naturally shed their winter coats. Timing is critical: shearing too late means loss of wool. In the rush, an estimated one million Australian sheep die every year of exposure after premature shearing. A closely shorn sheep is, in fact, more sensitive to cold than a naked man since a sheep's normal body temperature is about 102 degrees F, much higher than a human's. Shearers are usually paid by volume, not by hour, which encourages working quickly and carelessly.

When the sheep age and are no longer effective wool producers, they are transported long distances to slaughterhouses in trucks and trains without food or water. The ultimate cruelty is the live export of seven million sheep every year from Australia to the Middle East. These sheep travel vast distances until they reach the feedlots where they are held before being loaded onto ships. Many sheep, ill or wounded from the journey, faced with intensive crowding, disease, and strange food, die in the holding pens. Eighteen percent of sheep die during the 3-6 week transport process. The surviving sheep—7 million a year—are herded onto huge 14-tier-high ships resembling the old slave-trade ships. Up to 125,000 sheep are packed tightly into each ship, each allocated an area hardly bigger than themselves. The sheep suffer from sea-sickness, temperature extremes, disease, and injuries. Shipboard mortality ranges up to 10 percent, and for every sheep who dies, many others become ill and are injured. When the three-week trip to the Middle East is over, the surviving sheep are killed in ritual slaughter (Halal). The most effective way to help factory farmed sheep is to refrain from purchasing wool products.