

Spotlight on Agriculture

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INDIGENOUS CHICKENS

The Wise Choice

The project of reintroduction of selected and improved indigenous chickens into villages, was initiated during August 1996 from Mashare Agricultural Development Institute, Rundu.

WHY CHICKENS?

Chickens already form an important source in the provision of food and generation of income for the Kavango people. If a more secure food source can be provided by the introduction of selected and improved indigenous chickens into villages and through the training of farmers, it is also believed that it could help to decrease stocking rates of other livestock on natural pastures.

According to MacGregor and Abrams (Household protein production through sustainable egg production, Medunsa, 1997) the provision of eggs on a daily basis serves to provide high quality protein to the diet of the family. It balances the traditionally high energy diet of most rural families. Protein malnutrition of children between 1 and 3 years of age is one of the most common conditions found in the Third World. Protein malnutrition causes irreversible physical and mental retardation and makes children more susceptible to secondary infections. Eggs are especially rich in certain essential amino acids, in fact, one egg can supply over one third of the total protein and over one half of the essential amino acids required daily by a child between the ages of 1 and 3 years.

WHY INDIGENOUS CHICKENS?

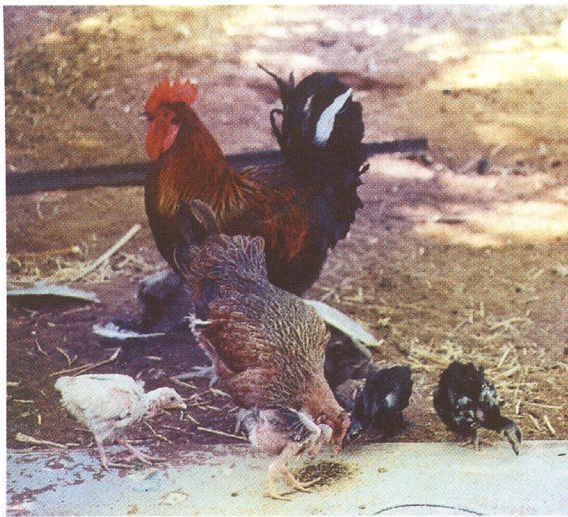
There are several main differences between indigenous chickens and genetically improved exotic breeds:

- Indigenous chickens are dual purpose (meat and

eggs). Exotic breeds are genetically improved to broilers (meat) or layers (eggs) only.

- Indigenous chickens become broody and can thus incubate their own eggs and are able to look after their own chicks. Exotic breeds in general only lay their eggs and are unable to look after their chicks. Electricity is needed for an incubator to incubate the eggs (if it is not for the sole purpose of human consumption) and to provide heat for the chicks.
- Due to this broodiness, the indigenous chicken hen only lay between 100 and 150 eggs per year (when collected and not left for natural incubation), in comparison the exotic layers can lay between 220 and 300 eggs per year from the age of 20 up to 72 weeks of age after which they are slaughtered. However, to be able to reach this high production level, the exotic layers also need 16 hours daylight, which must be supplied artificially.
- Indigenous chickens are free roaming and can thus relatively look after itself. It only needs additional feeding. Exotic breeds must be kept intensively on full balanced rations and intensive housing, meaning higher input costs for feed and housing.
- Indigenous chickens are well adapted to the environment, especially in connection with heat tolerance. In general exotic breeds cannot tolerate heat and die easily from heat exhaustion.

Thus, although indigenous chickens have lower reproduction levels, it also has much lower input levels (labour, costs and risks) than exotic breeds, which makes it more suitable for small scale farmers situated in isolated areas.



Three lines of indigenous chickens are available. Comparative production and reproduction figures will be available soon. The above are the so-called Ovambo line, although they can be found over most parts of Namibia. They come in a variety of feather colours and patterns. Although indigenous chickens can relatively look after itself, additional food such as mahangu, left over porridge or vegetable peels should be provided to ensure good growth and high production.



The indigenous chickens are well adapted to the environment, especially in connection with heat tolerance. It is however wise to provide well ventilated housing like this locally built house, to ensure a safe place for the hens to lay and incubate their eggs, and to provide shade during the daytime.



Young chicks of the Venda (Black and White) and Naked Necklines. Some chickens of the Ovambo line also have naked necks, which help to tolerate high temperatures better.



Chickens are sold at cost price to local farmers at the age of about six weeks.