



Spotlight on Agriculture

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RABBITS FOR MEAT IN THE COMMUNAL AREAS?

INTRODUCTION

In developing countries the average family comprises of 6 persons and one third of the families have a deficiency of vegetable and animal protein intake. In southern Namibia there is a large dependency on goats as the protein source. This is an arid / semi-arid environment and it sets severe limitations to livestock production. It is an ongoing struggle to build up flocks between the periodical droughts. It is therefore perhaps a good idea to substitute the home consumption of goat meat with rabbit meat, enabling the flocks to increase to the levels where animals can be marketed for an income.

Rabbits can produce high quality protein meat cheaply to a household. It is not in competition with the human diet and it has the advantage that it is a biological freezer. No cooling facilities are needed as one household will consume a rabbit in two meals. This is important since there is very often no electricity in the rural area.

ADVANTAGES

- No effect on natural grazing
- Need small amount of food for maintenance
- Can utilize roughage
- High feed turnover
- Need little space to produce & reproduce
- Not labour intensive
- Fresh meat on a daily basis



IN COMPARISON WITH GOAT PRODUCTION?

In Table 1 the differences between the nutritional needs of a rabbit and a Boer Goat on a daily basis are evident. In the non-pregnant stage the rabbit would consume about 10% of that consumed by the goat. The rabbit can also eat any scrap food from the kitchen, weed and vegetable leaves from the garden and other surplus vegetables and fruits. The exceptions are potato and tomato leaves and rubab, which is poisonous to these animals.

Table 1 Nutritional needs

	GOAT	RABBIT
Non pregnant (kg/day)	1.5	0.160
Late gestation (kg/day)	1.75	0.22
Lactating (kg/day)	1.8-2.0	0.37
Water consumption (l/day)	8-10	0.43-0.57

A rabbit would consume much less dry material than a goat and produce nearly twice as much meat (Table 2).

Table 2 Reproduction information for a year

	10 GOAT EWES & 1 RAM	10 DOES & 2 BUCKS
No of offspring	15	420
Minus 20% Mortality	12	336
Carcass weight in kg	15	1
Total meat in kg	180	336
Dry Material needed*	6200	4100

*11goats x 1.7kg x 365 days + 12 kids x 1.5 kg x 120 days =6172kg

*12 rabbits x 0,2 x 365 days + 336 young x 0,16 kg x 60days = 4101kg

This means that in terms of production rabbits can produce 336/180 or 1,86 as much meat as a goat while consuming 4100/6200 or only 66% of the dry matter. This gives a combined figure of 2,8 times as efficient in terms of production! It is fresh meat on a daily basis, while the goats can be kept to sell at the auctions for a cash income. The rabbits can also keep up their production throughout the drought while the goats usually go into a negative mode.

DOES IT WORK IN THE FIELD?

The Nico-North community in southern Namibia received their first five rabbits on 14/2/97. They were kept in separate cages hanging in the air. This method is used by commercial producers. This turned out as not to be the best way.

The mortality in this type of accommodation proves to be too high. One of the does died due to pasteurella while two gave birth to 15 young ones, none of which survived.



On 18/4/97 the community decided to take the production system down to the ground and the breeding nests were put under ground. The results were 62 offspring born during the following 12 months. The first males were slaughtered in December 1997. They started providing rabbits to other communities' members and sold prepared rabbit meat at auctions to promote rabbit meat in the district. The earnings from that totaled N\$350 over a period of 10 months.

The production is still far from the actual potential, but the idea has been bought by the community and a lot has been learned up to now. This can be a solution to the protein shortages in the southern communal area.