

Spotlight on Agriculture

Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development • Directorate of Agricultural Research and Training • Private Bag 13184 • Windhoek

No 47 August 2001

REDISCOVERING THE BLACK DIAMOND

Upgrading of Karakul for the communal farmers of southern Namibia

Karakul farming has survived hard times of low prices and meagre demand since the 1980s. In the southern communal areas of Namibia, as in the commercial areas, even the most devoted Karakul farmer had to diversify or even change to other commodities in order to survive financially. As a result Karakul sheep were, to a great extent, replaced by mutton sheep or goats or crossbreeds for meat production.

During the late 1990s, SWAKARA pelts experienced a definite change from the declining trends of these years. Prices and the demand for pelts increased, thus leading to an increase in the number of new Karakul farmers. Suddenly a new challenge was faced. The farmers had to increase the number of good quality pelts that had to be produced in a relatively short time. The Karakul Board, the Karakul Breeders' Society of Namibia and officials from the MAWRD collaborated to reach this objective through the following initiatives:

- Promoting Karakul farming in the commercial and communal sector of Namibia.
- Training farmers and officials in Karakul farming such as Karakul lamb description, pelt sorting and Karakul breeding.
- Upgrading Karakul flocks in the communal areas by:
 - Subsidising the price and distribution of good quality rams from top breeders to communal farmers in Namibia.
 - Using good quality rams from Gellap-Ost Research Station in Karakul flocks in the communal area. This also serves to demonstrate to farmers the effect of the use of a good quality ram on the quality of the pelts of his offspring.

THE KAMEELRIVIER KARAKUL UPGRADING DEMONSTRATION TRIAL

A demonstration trial which involves the use of good quality rams from Gellap-Ost Research Station to upgrade Karakul flocks in the communal area, was initiated by officials from the Farming Systems Research and Extension South Team and Ms E. Cooper. Ms Cooper and her daughters farm at *Kameelrivier*, 45 kilometers north-east of Keetmanshoop in the Berseba area. When the project was initiated in 1999, they had 40 pure Karakul ewes of relatively good quality, years of experience in Karakul farming and they also had attended various Karakul lamb description courses at Gellap-Ost. What they did not have was a ram as they could not afford to buy one from any of the top breeders.

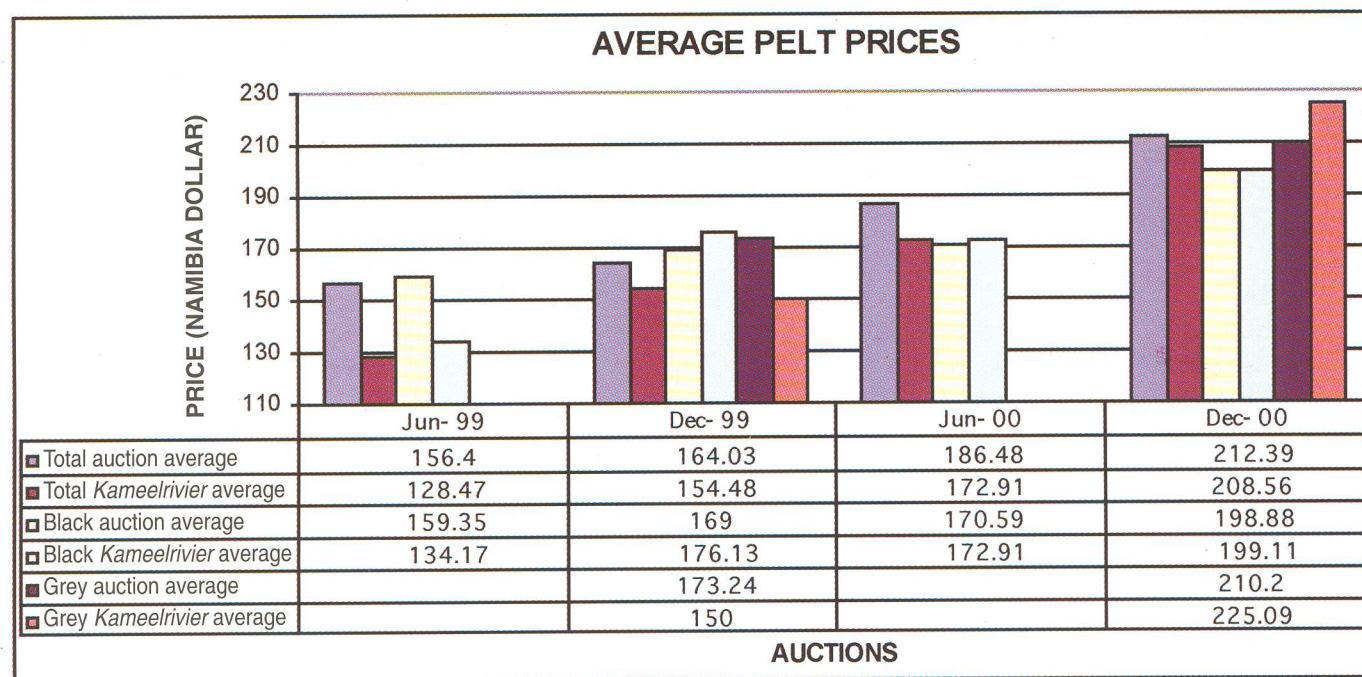
OBJECTIVES

- To upgrade the *Kameelrivier* Karakul flock in order to:
 - Achieve better prices and increase income.
 - Breed good quality ewes for themselves and to make ewes available to interested farmers.
- To monitor the effect of the good quality rams on the flock by:
 - Measuring the increase in average pelt price achieved at auctions and
 - Measuring the time needed to observe an increase in quality of the pelts produced.



According to the agreement of this demonstration trial, a ram of superior quality is made available for use to the farmer for the period of one month during the mating season (April/May). The ram must be kept on kraal for the whole period and the farmer is responsible for the feeding of the ram. The ewes are allowed to graze during the day, and are placed on kraal with the ram during the night. At the end of this one-month period, the ram is tested and screened for any diseases before it is handed back to the owner. The FSRE team facilitates the process and frequently visits the farmer to assist him/her with the management aspects of Karakul farming.

The results for the last auction before the project was started (June 1999) and the biannual auctions (June and December) until the end of 2000 are presented in the following graph. The reduced difference between the total average auction price and total average *Kameelrivier* price are already evident for the December 1999 auction.



For the 2001 mating season, Ms Cooper received a grant from SARDEP in order to purchase feed and could afford to make use of two rams from Gellap-Ost Research Station for 40 days during the mating season. The project will continue until the end of the 2002 season.

REASONS FOR SUCCESS

- The initiative came from the farmers.
- The farmers are committed.
- Management was improved and the farmers are keeping to the new management plan.
- Rams with very good hair quality are used.
- Karakul is highly adapted to the communal farming systems of southern Namibia.
- Training and technical support is given regularly.



Authors: Annamié Louwrens, Gellap-Ost Research Station, PO Box 103, Keetmanshoop, Namibia, Telephone 09-264-63-225221.
Chrisjan van Lill, PO Box 464, Mariental, Namibia, Telephone 09-264-63-240389.
Editor: Andrea van Niekerk, Private Bag 13184, Windhoek, Namibia, Telephone 09-264-61-2087013.