

GOATS A PRODUCER'S EXPERIENCE

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An appointment with the hangman's noose is guaranteed to clarify one's position, I will come back to this statement later in my paper.

Fifteen years ago I was appointed manager of a run down sheep and cattle property 100 km north of Bairnsdale, or 30 km south of Omeo in Eastern Victoria.

The average annual rainfall is 560 mm which is spread fairly evenly throughout the year. There is a decrease in the monthly average during May, June and July with an increase in September, October and November. During the last 15 years at Swift's Creek we have received the lowest and the highest rainfall ever recorded plus four major droughts. On top of this we have missed a couple of springs which have been followed by outstanding autumn breaks. So to say the least our seasons can be very risky. Altitude of this undulating to steep property ranges from 560 m to 750 m.

In 1970 we were employing up to 5 jackeroos and as the property slowly came together those that left were not replaced. Since 1976 we have not employed permanent staff. The use of bikes, laneways, larger paddocks and larger mobs, as well as greater use of radio and aircraft has helped to slash labour costs. During the last drought for example I could feed 10,000 sheep with grain on two properties 100 km apart and be home to listen to the futures report in about four hours.

"Negoura Station"

Negoura is a self replacing merino sheep operation with the breakdown as follows:

5,000 ewes
 3,000 wethers
 4,000 mixed sex weaners

Pastures

Pastures are mainly native with small areas of phalaris. In the early seventies, 750 kg/ha super. plus Woogenellup, Mt. Barker and Seaton Park sub. clover were spread by air. The property has been sensibly cleared, with shelter belts remaining. The valleys and gullies provide good shelter for stock, vermin and weeds such as blackberries, blanket weed, saffron thistle, variegated thistle, black thistle, suckers, wattle, prickly box, tea tree and briars.

Pasture management was achieved by set stocking of sheep or cattle. In the early days we ran a Hereford herd of 200 breeders but the high cost and low profitability soon became evident - out the gate they went!

Weed eradication, and not control, was the order of the day from 1970 to 1976. We poured men and money into this area for a negative result. For five years I pondered, observed and investigated various alternatives - sprays, biological control, pasture competition and goats.

Blackberry spray went from \$40 to \$270 for a 20 litre drum, and to quote Dr. Bill Parsons, "Despite years of research, we haven't had a major success with biological control, it's sometimes just a lucky break." As well, establishing competitive pasture in an area of erratic rainfall was considered too risky and costly.

I spoke to experts who said they knew all about those stinking, wandering, tin can eating useless animals, which in their opinion were worse than rabbits. But upon interrogating these experts I found out that all their information was hearsay and not based upon their own observations.

The hangman's noose was tightening in three areas; firstly the value of the property could start to depreciate, secondly the stocking rate would drop, and thirdly I was having difficulty in seeing the wood for the weeds.

On speaking to people who were actually running goats, and researching the meat and fibre markets, I became convinced that the humble goat had the potential to be the greatest development since sub. clover and super.

In the latter half of 1981, I attempted to purchase 200 angora wethers. These were all one line, one mark, from a footrot free area, with no worm resistance problem. This was not successful.

A major new enterprise commenced in July 1982 when I purchased 83 Angora cross does for \$14 per head. Within four months I realised that these animals had the potential to control my weed problem. By now I had made the decision to use cashmere type bucks instead of Angoras, even though the return from mohair was very close to Merino wethers.

The penalty one would have paid for burrs, etc., plus the kids being tangled in blackberries was unacceptable. In March 1984 I introduced 500 feral does and 200 wethers from Cobar.

Prior to expanding our number of goats we had embarked on a major fencing programme to completely electrify our boundary fence to stop the wild dogs, wombats, kangaroos and emus from trespassing on freehold land.

Another 2,500 does have been introduced since December 1985. Some allowance should be made for mortality of the initial feral stock as losses of up to 40% are not uncommon. Our deaths are about 2%, and these are mainly due to stress, from mustering, trucking and also from coccidiosis.

A maximum security paddock with plenty of hiding areas, good water and feed is essential. Do not bring northern goats into a southern winter. A very high percentage will abort due to the stress of the mustering, holding, transporting, etc. These animals are not as hardy as some people claim.

Health

All new animals are given 5 in 1 vaccine plus drenching upon arrival. We have not been game enough to treat them for lice at this time, as they have travelled 900-1,000 km.

Deaths from cold stress have been related directly to management, the four main factors being; stocking rate shearing time, provision of shelter and body condition.

Mating

Up until May 1985 bucks were allowed to run with the does all year. The main problem with this idea is mothering or loss of kids during mustering or shearing.

Their early sexual maturity and lactation will reduce the amount of cashmere. For instance kid bucks will work at three months and kid does kid at ten months. This year our programme is to join in March for six weeks only. This will allow us to mark kids at the end of September and wean by December. This will give does an opportunity to increase body weight for joining plus the growing of cashmere from January to June.

Bucks will be joined at 1%. Kidding percentage can go as high as 160-170%. Our best at this stage is 120%.

Shearing takes place in May. As cashmere tends to grow from January to June the aim is to remove it before it sheds. There is evidence to support the claim that once you notice this shedding you could have lost up to 40% of your fleece. The fibre is removed the same way as a sheep with no alteration to shearing gear. Belly fibre is not shorn.

Table 1 Financial returns

1983 to 1.3.86

Purchases:	
5,300 does, bucks and wethers	\$78,000
Total sales:	
2,400 boat wethers and fibre sales	\$63,000
Stock on hand:	
2,000 does @ \$28.00 per head	\$56,000
700 mixed sex weaners @ \$22.00 per head	\$14,000
18 bucks +	
200 wethers	\$11,000
<u>Total value of stock on hand</u>	<u>\$81,000</u>

If we allow \$3,000 for shearing, vaccine, drenches, etc., it appears we are ahead by approximately \$63,000.

Considering that the original object of the goat exercise was for weed control, there is also a saved cost for chemical weed control to be accounted for.

This cost of approximately \$3,000 per year has been removed during the last two years, giving an extra net benefit of \$6,000 in saved chemical costs as a result of running the goats.

At this point I would like to make some comments on using goats to eliminate weeds. From my experience and also from my observations of other properties, it is obvious that there are potentially great dangers to goats used for this purpose. Problems of very high stocking rates lead to drastic liveweight losses resulting in animals of poor condition that are vulnerable to parasitic infestations, cold and stress.

I have increased "Negoura's" carrying capacity by 25-30% without affecting the sheep enterprise at this stage. Although I feel goats or sheep will have to be reduced in numbers in two years.

The following are quoted prices for cashmere from April 1st 1985.

100% cashmere down (excluding guardhair)

White down

up to 15.9 microns	\$110/kg
16 - 16.9 microns	\$105/kg
16.9-17.9 microns	\$ 95/kg
18 - 19 microns	\$ 60 kg

The next grade is grey followed by brown and the price tapers off naturally as you go down on those grades.

15.9 micron grey \$82/kg
15.9 micron brown \$60/kg

So in conclusion, Mr. Chairman the ability of goats to control weeds is obvious as is the cost saving benefits. Their use in maintaining more productive pastures will increase returns. The ability to run goats in addition to existing stock allows more efficient pasture production, and their economic value provides diversification of income.

The fibre has even more to offer, cashmere has never been over supplied, Texas and South Africa are the main suppliers of mohair. Goat meat is the most widely eaten meat in the world. During the religious season in the Middle East they will pay up to \$150 per head for goats compared to \$100 for sheep meat. Some figures on our live export for instance show that in 1982, 3,000 head were exported and in 1983, 30,000.

My own investigations show that of eight top restaurants in Melbourne, six would take kid meat immediately. The meat market to the north of us is waiting to be developed. Great potential exists for the goat industry; it is in a unique position for a new industry of having a guaranteed market already awaiting its product.

Economic studies indicate that potential returns from mohair and cashmere goat production could outstrip the current returns from Merino sheep in some areas, and bolster farmer's incomes by being grazed with sheep and cattle to increase effective stocking rates in others. To realise this potential however, the goat enthusiast must overcome the traditional grazier apathy and contempt for goats. Man's reluctance to accept change is normal behaviour, so therefore, a shot gun or a hangman's noose is generally required to force a change in direction.