



Ideas are easy. It's the execution of ideas that really separates the sheep from the goats.



Goats are more resilient than cattle and therefore offer greater social and food security. Goats are perhaps also the only weapon against bush encroachment.

PHOTOS: RAURI ALCOCK

It' time to get the goat market going

A Msinga project's promotion of goat farming is taking off as it makes good sense for multiple reasons

YVES VANDERHAEGHEN

DEEP in Msinga, goat things have been happening, largely on the quiet. While cattle herds have been devastated by the drought, goat numbers have held up, partly because they're resilient creatures, but also because the Mdukatshani Rural Development Project has been working at ways to keep them healthy and productive. Its successes have encouraged the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform to put R50 million into a project to boost goat production in five districts in KwaZulu-Natal: Mzinyathi, Thukela, Uthungulu, Zululand and uMkhanyakude. Together with funds from the Department of Agriculture and the EU, the total investment comes to over R70 million.

The KZN Goat Agribusiness Project aims, within five years, to stitch together a value chain that will double indigenous goat production, develop 7 000 women commercial farmers, create 620 youth jobs and 270 microbusinesses, and generate R100 million in extra value from the herds.

Where did the goat project start? "Actually," says Mdukatshani director Rauri Alcock, "it all started with chickens." Post land reform, agricultural support was mainly directed towards cattle. "If you asked farmers why they wanted land, they always said because they wanted cattle. Sometimes this was for sentimental reasons, but not always."

But this affected only a small part of the community, says Gugu Mbatha, Mdukatshani's projects manager. Firstly, cattle tend to be owned by men, and so support for cattle excluded women, and "did not redress the power ratio between men and women". In any case, notes Alcock, cattle would sometimes be owned by men who were working in Johannesburg. And so, because they were not on site, you always had to phone them before you could do anything, and this would always take time and the delays made any interventions impractical.

"What is the use", asks Mbatha, "of supporting men. If they have five cattle, for example, that amounts to the equivalent of about R50 000. The question we had to answer was, do we help wealthy people, or do we help people trying to make a livelihood?"

That's why, she says, "women are our clients, and those are the farmers we help". Besides, says Alcock, "access to cattle is more complicated, beyond just men and wealth. There are cultural issues. For example, *makhosis* are not allowed into the kraal. Menstruating women are not allowed into the kraal. And so the daily handling and management of the cattle becomes problematic.

"So we asked: 'How do we work with women at their homes in Msinga', and the answer was chickens," says Alcock. That was nine years ago, and Mdukatshani launched a chicken vaccination and management programme to reduce mortality rates. "Now, the main problem for chickens is not disease. The vac-

inations work, and the bigger problem is feeding them."

The success of this initiative was summarised by one woman, MaNdebele Skhakhane, who said that her very robust flock was able to provide meat which, because of the drought's impact on household budgets, has become too expensive and cannot be included in the grocery shop.

But as Alcock points out, however successful their work with chickens is, "it's not enough".

"Say you're a widow," he says. "You have two children. You'll incur expenses. Your social capital isn't in chickens. You'll pay with goats or cattle. If you don't have either, it is very expensive. If you have four goats, that's the equivalent of one cow. If you have that, you have collateral for transactions. Without goats at least, you'll always be stuck, and you'll have to pay cash for any damages, for example."

Ergo, goats, and not just because they're a logical way to give women control over their lives and to build wealth. Whichever way you look at it, says Alcock, you have to ask: "Why not goats?"

One very obvious reason they make good agricultural sense is offered by the drought.

"Cattle numbers have collapsed. In some families, farmers have lost all their cattle because of the drought." Goat numbers, on the other hand, have "stalled". There have been losses, says Alcock, but "it's the new production, the kids, that have mainly died. That means that while numbers haven't increased, they haven't dropped".

The implications are huge. Alcock reckons it'll take maybe 10 years to regenerate cattle herds, and for some farmers their losses result in a "terminal exit" from farming because they cannot raise the capital to start over. Alcock suggests that while cattle farming makes sense in some areas, goats are more resilient and therefore offer greater social and food security.



Rauri Alcock, director of Mdukatshani Rural Development Project and general go-to guy on the subject of indigenous goats in South Africa.

A second reason goats make good sense is that they are a good, perhaps the only, weapon against bush encroachment, which is the result of increased carbon emissions and it soaks up precious water in catchment areas. "Think about it," says Alcock. "There

are maybe 10 to 20 million hectares of land affected by bush encroachment. Most probably more than we have as game reserves. At this rate it will cause rhino, buffalo and other grazers to disappear, and all you'll have left are impala and goats."

Far from destroying the environment, as public perception would have it, goats may well save it. "It's just a boogeyman" that goats are destructive, says Alcock impatiently.

Moreover, "as organised agriculture collapses, goats will fill the gap", says Alcock. Isn't that a bit of a stretch? No, says Alcock. "Look around you. Where do you see a fence? It's either high-security fences around game farms, or else the fences have collapsed. The advantage of goats is that they self-herd, so it doesn't matter."

His vision does, he admits, entail a fundamental shift in agriculture in areas where goats make more sense than any other livestock. As for the impact of vast numbers of goats, Alcock says: "We cannot imagine high enough numbers to push back on bush encroachment. Even high-volume goat areas have bush encroachment."

The odd thing about goats, however, is that they are ubiquitous, on the one hand, and yet, on the other, they are not officially reflected anywhere. Alcock estimates with confidence that there are about one million goats in KZN, but more likely about three million. But even so, "there is no South African goat policy", which means that "there is no support for them and no research".

"Just think," says Alcock, "goats were the first domesticated herd animals in human history, but there's so little research on them anywhere". Furthermore, "officially, no goat meat is sold in South Africa", he says. Meat statistics are gathered at abattoirs, but since goats do not go to abattoirs for slaughter, they don't figure. Stats SA, which has data on every imaginable agricultural activity, has no data whatsoever for goats since 1988. And goats were not earmarked for assistance during the drought, while cattle were supported with fodder or through being moved to where there was grazing.

What is known is that the demand for goats is insatiable, and production

simply cannot keep up with demand. South Africa imports 400 000 goats from Namibia a year. Other provinces sell almost their entire production to KZN, and it's still not enough. The agribusiness project hopes not only to provide enough for the KZN market, but also to start exporting foot-and-mouth free goats.

Alcock is encouraged that goats are starting to be taken seriously, and government support is very welcome. But while he has a grand vision, he's not given to grand schemes. Start small. Do the research. Work out what works. And always recognise that "farmers farm where they are", which means that any support needs to be local, specific and practical. Alcock already has a track record in this. Some years ago he came up with the idea of manufacturing protein/energy licks for goats, except that farmers were shown how to mix the ingredients at home and compact them into small bricks themselves. One spin-off has been that block-making machines are now being built for this purpose, and with this comes the possibility of block-making microbusinesses, which enables small entrepreneurs to enter agriculture, although not as farmers. The impact of this innovation is that it keeps kids and ewes healthy, and this reduces the mortality rates.

"If you can stop just the die-off — the mortality rate among kids — then you should have an immediate boost in production of 20% to 40%. It's probably an easy problem to fix," he says.

A boost in production creates its own problems, however. Managing herd sizes, and getting the right balance between ewes, kids and castrates (which fetch the highest price), is tricky. And then maintaining the right balance between selling and producing is a science on its own. Optimum herd size is 60: more than that, and you run into trouble. "We don't know why yet, but it is", says Alcock, and that means "you can't just give a farmer 200 goats and a fence. It won't work".

Anticipating the importance of goats finding their way into the commercial market, Mdukatshani and the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform have been holding goat auctions, for the first time, to ensure that farmers are not blocked once their herd numbers start rising. After a slow start, they are now developing momentum.

While logic dictates that a goat industry is long overdue, Alcock acknowledges that there are image issues to overcome. Goat meat, he notes, "is seen as eaten only in times of sadness or debt". That perception needs to change. At the last goat auction earlier this year, two top Durban chefs served up cordon bleu goat dishes to dignitaries headed by King Goodwill Zwelithini. "That's the eye candy part of the project", to create a receptive environment, says Alcock.

It doesn't take much to get Alcock enthusing about goats, and it's clearly catching on now. As he says: "Mdukatshani has put goats on the national agenda in a huge way."

Prejudices should remain private

RON NICOLSON

I HAVE my own private prejudices. I think men who wear socks with sandals are naffs. I think people at concerts who clap in the middle of a piece are Philistines (unless, of course, it is opera or ballet, in which case you can interrupt, cheer and boo whenever you like).

I rejoice when Australia are beaten at cricket. One of my favourite jokes manages to put down the Irish and Australians at the same time.

I enjoy reading prejudiced comments or looking at prejudiced cartoons. I like *Noseweek*. I like comments that go against political correctness. None of us is politically correct at heart. I have my own prejudices about global warming, BEE and transformation in sport.

Of course, if you press me, my prejudices are unfair. Men who wear socks are probably nice men who live in Germany where socks with sandals is equivalent, it appears, to be on a par with wearing Dolce and Gabbana. People who clap after every movement in a symphony are just enjoying the music. I don't know any Irishmen, but half of my children are Australian.

My wife has prejudices, too. She thinks I am genetically predisposed to losing my car keys. She thinks I am hopeless at looking for them when to her eyes they are plainly in sight. Of course that is unfair too — she can only find them so quickly, I think, because she put them there in the first place.

Prejudices are what you say at a dinner party after several glasses of wine. But you won't be able to defend them in the cold light of day. And you should never make them public. So the moral of the story is that you should never, ever, put your prejudices on social media. Note to wife: no mention of car keys on Facebook lest everyone should think I am an idiot.

I'm not a great believer in social media. I never post on Facebook, although in an idle moment I may read other people's posts and laugh at their jokes. I have never tweeted on Twitter and nor would I know how. I do go on to WhatsApp but only to my family group and never to express any opinion other than "Happy birthday", "Sorry you are ill", and "So the Sharks lost again" (thankfully I didn't need to send that last weekend).

I can never understand why people commenting on social media seem to believe that they are just having a cosy chat with a few close friends and say things they would never have said in public. People, social media is public. And someone will resend your stupid views.

We see it constantly. Diane Kohler Barnard, Penny Sparrow, and now Judge Mabel Jansen — not to mention Steve Hofmeyer and many others. Kohler Barnard, Sparrow and Jansen would probably never have said what they posted on social media if they had known it would go public — I can't say the same about Hofmeyer.

So can't I have prejudices? Must I carefully police my thoughts? Can't I tell jokes about Australians?

Prejudices can be fun, even funny. I can make jokes about Australians because Barry Humphries did it better with his skit on Dame Edna. Australians can laugh at themselves. I can tell Van der Merwe jokes because Pieter Dirk Uys led South Africans in laughing at ourselves. But nobody in Humphries' reviews suggested that Australians are monkeys. Nobody in Pieter Dirk Uys shows suggested that nationalist politicians were all rapists.

Sometimes harsh things need to be said. But that's not prejudice, that's legitimate political comment and we can expect to be challenged on it. Legitimate comment may elicit hostility, even anger, in those whom we criticise. If Jansen really believes, without reserve, that rape is socially acceptable in the black community let her say so in serious scientific conferences and journals, provide the evidence and be ready to face the flak. It's not a thing to say on social media.

Prejudices are funny (at least I think mine are) provided they don't hurt anyone. But it is a fine line. Prejudices against the vulnerable, against people who are already hurting, against people who are socially disadvantaged, prejudices that hurt, should be kept to yourself. So, yes, we should police our thoughts. Of course I am prejudiced. I am male, I am white, I grew up in South Africa. I have secret prejudices that I won't share with you, but I am ashamed of them. I certainly won't put them on social media.

But if you want to know the joke about the man who wanted to be Irish and became an Australian, I am happy to tell you in private.

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