

Putting goat farming on the map

By Nan Smith | 2 December 2016



Goats are important small stock animals in the sub-Saharan region. Tough and resilient, they reproduce fairly effortlessly, and are relatively easy to transport and, therefore, to market. Goats are a versatile animals and a source of milk, meat and hides for consumers. Their reputation for being destructive is an ill-considered judgement.

Goat farming has long been relegated to the back seat of stock farming. It could be developed to play a much larger role in the future.

The recently reported demand for goat meat from Saudi Arabia has generated strong interest in Zambia. It could be a good driver of growth in the small stock sector. But to respond to an increased demand, stockmen and women need to up their game. They need to manage their flocks with an eye on animal condition, intakes and health including vaccination programmes.

Once the flock is producing 100 kids a season, the margins start to look very attractive for the small farmer. Because of their high fertility and the number of multiple births in goat populations, it's much easier to grow the flock than a cattle herd.

Stockmen can go for one of three options with goats; meat production, milk and cheese production, and wool production; or you could explore all three options. There is a growing market for goat milk

which is considered a better choice than cow's milk for people, especially children, who suffer from dairy allergies.

Cashmere and Angora goats are generally farmed for their wool which is in demand world-wide for its superb quality.

If goats are to be farmed for their milk, a more expensive infrastructure is needed. However, it is nowhere near as expensive as a conventional milking cow dairy.

Flock size, herding and fencing

Fewer than 100 to 150 goats is not really enough to sustain one family, but it is a foundation flock. The flock can be grown to 300 or 500 animals depending on what you plan to do with the goats. To contain goats in an area you need to put in additional strands of barbed wire or electric wire because they are expert escape artists.

They don't need elaborate shelter, but a simple field shelter that protects them from rain, wind and the sun is a good idea. Build the shelter so that it faces away from the prevailing winds and provides shade when temperatures get too high. They can handle the cold but don't like extreme heat.



Goats are essentially browsers but have the capacity to make use of a wide variety of plant material. Watch it if there is lucerne or clover nearby since the legume crops can cause bloat in goats.

Health

If goats are run on communal land, the goatherd should be working the goats on a consistent basis. Check goats rotated in a fenced area at least once a day. Goats can get sick and die before you

know it, unless you are keeping an eye on them, and pick up problems before it's too late for treatment.

A healthy goat is easy to identify; active, curious, on the move, bright eyed. Sick goats stand out in a healthy flock. Take sick and injured goats out of the flock and house them close by for treatment.

Every stockman needs basic handling facilities for treating animals and some form of basic vet box to treat injuries and inject sick animals when necessary. The problem may be keeping certain medications cold. If you do not have cold storage or a fridge, keep effective meds, that don't need to be in the fridge, in a cool place.

Keep vaccinations in a cold chain. When need to vaccinate, pack ice into an ice bag and store that days vaccines in there.

Hooves and castration

Watch their hooves for injuries and treat early to prevent permanent lameness and unnecessary culling. Many otherwise healthy goats lose production purely because hoof problems were not treated early enough. It doesn't make sense to lose an animal because you failed to check feet and hooves and treat problems early. It may be something as simple as taking out a stone lodged in the hoof.

Castrate kid males early, before they are two weeks old. Castrating by using the elastrator band is a handy way to do it. If you're going to dehorn, do it as early as five days after birth.

Feed

Goats are ruminants. They have uniquely adapted stomachs to process browsing. Where they can roam freely, goats will utilise virtually any type of crop and browse material, including the leaves of thorny Acacia trees. The wider the variety in their diets the better they like it, and it makes feeding them cheaper. They eat shrubs, young tree saplings, broadleaf plants.

Marketing

Network with other goat farmers to find out what the market is. Use the internet to access market demand. Once you have traded in the local market and familiarised yourself with marketing procedures, it will be easier to go further afield.

To meet the increased demand for goat meat in Saudi Arabia, many more facilities and co-operatives will need to be set up to help goat farmers come up to capacity in Zambia.