

Sherana Sheep Report No 12
“Cane Toads of the Sheep World?”
and other things.
April 2009

1. Introductory Excuses

The other day I heard Mother-of-All-Things on the phone. Apparently someone had enquired about the next newsletter, pointing out it was almost a year since the last one.

“I know just how you feel” said MOAT (she has had a life time of training in anxiety management and always has the right soothing words).

“In fact”, she continued, “I have been waiting for 18 months for repair of a gate and over 2 years for a trough float to be fixed. The gate has been fixed with so much pink string it looks like a decorated Christmas tree, and I have become expert using the tap and a mother’s sixth sense to switch the water on and off at the tank without the sheep dying of thirst or the trough overflowing.”

The reason for this delay is Climate Change. After years of drought, we have had some rain, and all the problems have been hidden in rampant green grass and climbing siratro. And we cannot waste that grass by tramping around fixing fences and floats, can we?

So, I gave her some decent tie wire for the gate, and loaned her my binoculars to make checking the water level easier, while I thought up excuses for the newsletter.

So why is the newsletter so delayed?

Firstly, Rouseabout had a life-focussing experience late last year, which prompted a spate of spine bashing and naval gazing.

He was driving at steady highway speed with plenty of traffic on a good but narrow bitumen road near Moranbah in Central Queensland. Suddenly, with no warning, he spotted an old Toyota ute stopped dead, in the middle of the road about 3 car lengths ahead. It was waiting to turn right into a small gravel side road. There were no highway signs, no passing lane, and it appeared there were no indicators or stop lights working on the old Ute. Rouseabout’s car went from 95 kph to dead stopped in 3 seconds flat without touching the brakes. The car was killed stone dead, but Rouseabout still managed to open the door and get out of the car unaided (the air bag worked perfectly). The car caught fire, could not be extinguished, and was 100% write off (luckily it was a fully insured Avis rental car).

Tow truck, ambulance and police arrived, in that order.

I told them all “I’m fine”, even though I was far from “fine” (Why? see below).

An Irish farmer named Seamus had a car accident.

In court, the trucking company’s hot-shot solicitor was questioning Seamus.

“Didn’t you say to the Police at the scene of the accident, “I’m fine?” asked the solicitor.

Seamus responded: “Well, I’ll tell you what happened. I had just loaded my favourite cow, Bessie, into the...”

“I didn’t ask for any details”, the solicitor interrupted. “Just answer the question. Did you not say, at the scene of the accident, ‘I’m fine!’?”

Seamus said, "Well, I had just got Bessie into the trailer and I was driving down the road...."

The solicitor interrupted again and said, "Your Honour, I am trying to establish the fact that, at the scene of the accident, this man told the police on the scene that he was fine. Now several weeks after the accident, he is trying to sue my client. I believe he is a fraud. Please tell him to simply answer the question."

By this time, the Judge was fairly interested in Seamus's answer and said to the solicitor: "I'd like to hear what he has to say about his favourite cow, Bessie".

Seamus thanked the Judge and proceeded. "Well as I was saying, I had just loaded Bessie, my favourite cow, into the trailer and was driving her down the road when this huge lorry and trailer came through a stop sign and hit my trailer right in the side. I was thrown into one ditch and Bessie was thrown into the other. I was hurt, very bad like, and didn't want to move.

"However, I could hear old Bessie moaning and groaning. I knew she was in terrible pain just by her groans.

"Shortly after the accident, a policeman on a motorbike turned up. He could hear Bessie moaning and groaning so he went over to her. After he looked at her, and saw her condition, he took out his gun and shot her between the eyes.

"Then the policeman came across the road, gun still in hand, looked at me, and said, 'How are you feeling?'

"Now what the would you have said?"

Out of my brush with eternity, all I ended up with was a collapsed vertebra, which, after a few weeks of easy going, seems to be no problem – I'm just a bit shorter, so I now wear high heels (but no silk stockings, thank you).

And the final excuse:

Rouseabout, like Horatius on the bridge, has been opposing the Tuscan hordes trying to take over management of the climate. After their performance at managing the health system, regulating the banks and providing safe roads, I am appalled at the prospect of them managing anything else. Imagine the result if these clowns could control the climate or the weather – we would have party whips horse trading rain for the Murray Darling, heavy snow for the ski crowd, fine weather for the State of Origin and cooling breezes on Cape York to cool Noel Pearson's anger about their theft of the Wild Rivers on the Cape.

(MOAT just looked over my shoulder and said "You have spent one and a half pages on excuses - for goodness sake get on with it".)

2. Preserving Cane Toads.

Cane toads get a bad rap. No one is ever convicted for cruelty to cane toads, there is no Cane Toad Protection Society, and no media tart is writing heart-rending scare stories as to how Global Warming is destroying the last key habitat of the cane toad.

All of this left me unconcerned – I had too many crusades already, and cane toads looked like they were quite capable of taking care of themselves. But then some toffy merino lover in Snivelling South Wales described damaras as "The Cane Toads of the Sheep World". That got my attention because there is some truth in that statement.

Both damaras and cane toads are the ultimate sustainable animals – they can compete for their niche in the world and make the best of whatever environment they find themselves. There are damaras in the Canadian snow, in tropical heat, and in the deserts of Namibia and Rosevale.

For some years now I have been corresponding with Dawie du Toit, a South African sheep breeder who is the unelected, unofficial President of the World Damara Federation.

Dawie has written a marvellous book on damaras full of interesting text and many colour pictures. It looks like a great book, but I have only seen it from across the room – since we got it, it has resided on the desk of MOAT, and every smoko I hear things like “Oh look at the one – looks just like our “Velvet”, or “Dawie says damara mothers will defend their lambs even from Bengal tigers”. (If I said that I would be accused of telling tall stories!).

I asked her to give me a couple of good quotes from Dawie’s book for the newsletter. “I don’t read all the small print”, she says, “I just read the pictures”.

(PS We are thinking of importing a few copies of Dawie’s book. If you are interested in getting one too, drop us an email.)

Dawie also recently gave a paper in Paris on the history and migration of livestock into Southern Africa entitled “**The Indigenous Livestock of Southern Africa**”. In it, he discussed Ankole cattle of Uganda, Red Masai sheep of Kenya, Africaner sheep of the Cape, Zulu and Pedi sheep of the Bantu speaking people, and Sanga cattle and Damara sheep of the Damara and Himba people in Northern Namibia. On the front of his report is a picture of a golden ram from the National Museum in Afghanistan which looks just like a damara (it is probably a Mouflon sheep, the likely ancestor of all sheep).

Dawie describes the damara as “one of the world’s most valuable sheep breeds”.

“Damara genes have to a large extent been shaped by natural selection”, says Dawie, “The Damara had to survive for centuries without veterinary support in a hostile environment - - - the Damara is the only one of the few sheep breeds in Southern Africa that, over millennia, walked all the way down Africa with its African pastoralists”.

Dawie’s paper also has an interesting history of the Merino, which also migrated a long way from Spain via France to South Africa. But merinos did not walk there – they arrived by sea, POSH class, on silk cushions in golden cages.

If you would like to read this interesting paper, Dawie has given us permission to put it on our web site and you can find it at:

<http://damaras.com/newsletters/du-toit.pdf>

So, we wear the “Cane Toads” badge with pride, and welcome converts to the Cane Toad Protection Society (Rosevale Branch). (With all the harassment we get from the government I feel a bit like a cane toad myself.)

When the world experiences real Climate Change, and becomes cold and dry again, all the pampered species dependent on vaccinations and vets, shelter sheds, feedlots, irrigated pasture, grain feeding, mulesing, tail docking, chemical wormers and tickicides will disappear like the dodo. What will be left?

Cane toads, cockroaches and crocodiles.

So, get with the strength – Damaras - the Cane Toads of the Sheep World.

Here is a letter from the second member of the Society (and an avid student of the green religion):

Cane Toads are Green too.

“When I lived on my farm on the Atherton Tableland near Kairi and overlooking Lake Tinaroo, we were plagued by pasture pests.

On the very top of the hill on which the nearby house was built I installed a mercury light on top of the 25,000 gallon fresh water tank.

Every moth in the district flocked to the light.

So did the cane toads. As the moths flew low or landed the toads ate them.

The cane toads got fat. The pests disappeared and we no longer had to spray our pastures to get rid of grub plagues.

*Ron Kitching, ex-Brahman breeder
(the big cane toads of the cattle world).*

3. Preserving the Best Damara Genetics

Some people devote their lives to preserving pandas, polar bears and pink crested purple people eaters. Others raise pint-sized ponies designed for pygmies.

We will devote ourselves to preserving the best and purest damara genetics we can find. We will of course select our breeders, but there will be no specific selection for non-essential things like colour, body conformation or fatter-is-better. And we will never encourage the development of a “show ring culture” in damaras. We will breed hardy sheep that are easy to look after and can live sustainably with no artificial help in natural Australian conditions. We aim at maximising production of low cost meat per acre, not maximising production of high cost meat per animal. And we aim at maximising profit per acre, not price per animal.

We are always on the lookout for new genetic lines, and recently discovered a small closed flock of damaras at Inverell that had been isolated on the one farm for 3 generations. They were all showing signs of mineral deficiency, but that has not affected the genes. We negotiated a fair exchange for one of our rams and some ewes, and got the old sheep and a few of their offspring. The best acquisitions were a ram originally from South Africa via Hall Damara and two ewes originally from Petra Sholtz, a South African damara breeder. The ram is now with 100 new damara ladies and the ewes are with our best damara ram.

We also hope to soon take delivery of a consignment of new damara genetics packaged in old ewes from Longreach.

So you can always be sure we will be able to find new genetics for you, with plenty of genetic variation, when it comes time to change your ram, or add a few more rams or ewes. We know the breeding history of every animal, and can guarantee the pure damara status of our damara breeders. And we are very picky now about what breeders we retain.

Here is a photo of a magnificent damara ram taken by Dawie du Toit:



4. Damaras are Different

Damaras are different, but most of their differences are also their advantages – they are hardy, intelligent, long legged, good walkers, long lived, fertile, good mothers, have a great flocking instinct, are easy to muster, wary of fences and learn quickly. All of these survival traits developed under natural selection.

Damaras have only two disadvantages – they don't look like "normal" sheep and they don't act like "normal" sheep.

Mainly, they are more timid and flighty than most man-bred sheep. It is easy to start a stampede, and when cornered they form a tight "circle of safety" in one corner of the pen – packed so tightly together that all except the dumb slow ones on the outside are safe.

Trying to load or unload a "circle of safety" can be a challenge. The key is to foresee what the sheep will do, and design things so they can run along a race or lane right to where you want them, with no wide spaces where they will be tempted to stop and go into another "circle of safety". And learn where to stand, how to move, and then give them time to work out where the exits are. Like all animals when threatened, they move to where it seems safest, which may not be where you want them to go. The trick is to get them thinking, that where you want them, is the safest place to be.

5. The War on Worms

Sheep tell us when they need worming. We are getting an eye for it now - no energy, droopy ears, rough coat, pale skin, bottle jaw and of course the pink eyelid test.

***Below is a very weak and wormy dorper, needing immediate drenching.
Note the bottle jaw, drooping ears bowed head and generally dreary look.
(This one survived but some don't if they get to this stage without treatment.)***



We are using far less chemical drench for worms now - mainly for lambs on weaning and then just for sickies like the dorper above. We lose about one sheep per year to worms. Every death, though sad, strengthens our gene pool. We also note all sheep that ever needed special worming, and make sure we do not select a breeding ram from that mother.

Why do damara seem to suffer less from worms? – One reason is they spend more time eating taller grass. They start at the seed head and work down. Worm larvae tend to be found lurking on short green grass on a wet or dewy morning. Our dorpers spend more time nibbling short green grass around the water points, and pick up more worms there. Damaras in the same flock will be out in the sun, eating tall grass. Damaras also seem to eat a greater variety of weeds and shrubs, some of which probably tend to eliminate worms.

We are also finding that if you keep supplying the right mineral nutrition most adult sheep can cope with worms.

6. Dogs and Dingos.

For years we have not yarded our spare rams at night – they live for weeks in some rough country we call “The Badlands”. At night they go close to the top of a hill and camp quietly in a tight little bunch. We usually leave the cattle weaners in that paddock too so they can help protect one another.

Then recently, without warning, a pack of dogs must have found them. In just one attack we had two dorpers dead, four Meatmasters injured. Two had to be put down, two with just strains and bruises survived. No flighty fleet footed damaras were killed or injured.

So Fixit now has an addition to his job description. As well as fixing bobcats, quad bikes, electric appliances, chain saws and leaking tanks, he is now a fully certificated dog hunter. When he gets into his camouflage coat, bush hat and home-made gaiters, not even Sheba can recognise him.

No kills to report yet.

From our experience, the ways to beat dogs are:

- Dog proof fence – to be totally effective, it will be very expensive. A combination hinge-joint with outlier electric wire at dog nose height is probably 100% effective if well built and maintained.

- Guardians – we have tried Maremma dogs and llamas. Maremmas are the best, but harder to train, handle and feed. Llamas are no trouble at all and hate dogs, but they cannot chase them through fences like the Maremma can. Alpacas, cattle, donkeys, camels, even horses, will help, but donkeys and horses can also harm lambs by playing with them too roughly. Other dog breeds may work but in our experience, Maremma are tops. But Maremmas will not do anything else but guard. They are like wild dogs with just a thin veneer of civilisation. Don't consider Maremma if you have close neighbours.
- Scarers that fool dogs into thinking humans are around – we have heard of radios blaring loudly, bells hung on sheep etc
- Regular shooting and poisoning (but unless your neighbour does it too, new predators just move in).

Lessons on Detering Predators

Notice from the Ministry of Fish & Wildlife, Mozambique.

Because of the increasing frequency of human-lion encounters we advise all travelers to take extra precautions while in the bush.

We advise outdoorsmen to wear little noisy bells so as to warn any lions that may be close.

We also advise you to carry pepper spray in case of a close encounter.

You should also watch for evidence of lion activity, and be able to tell between lion cub shit and big lion shit.

Lion cub shit is smaller and has berries and fur in it.

Big lion shit has little bells in it and smells like pepper.

ENJOY YOUR STAY IN MOZAMBIQUE

7. The Goat Palace

After a lifetime of cattle, and many years of sheep, we have done what I thought we would never do – we have some goats. Two does (that's what they call "ewes" I'm told) and their two small lambs – British Alpine milking goats.

Why goats? The main reason was we do not trust the quality of the milk you buy now – most of it is produced in factory feedlots and is so pasteurised, medicated, homogenised, calcium enriched, fat-reduced and fiddled with, that it has no life or goodness left. So we wanted our own milk. Tried cows but MOAT found them too big and too much hassle.

These are lovely goats and, without trying hard, we have plenty of milk from just two milkers, milked once per day. And the milk is far better than we thought it would be.



Ballerina, the British Alpine adolescent kid.

What about the economics of milking goats?

These goats are British upper class. They are used to living in a small "paddock" with a shed for shelter and being hand fed with good hay and breakfast cereals ("steamed barley flakes with molasses thanks"). They may deign to nip off a few seed heads of clean green panic, and demand a branch of tipuana leaves every day, but none of this roughing it with the damaras living on spear grass in the hills, thank you.

To date, after constructing the Goat Palace (with roof insulation and gravel floor), the Goat Milking parlour, the burglar proof goat gates, and getting the hay feeder, the collars, the leads and the breakfast cereals, I calculate with an average production of 1.3 litres of milk every day (after the kids each have a swig) we have got the cost of our healthy milk supply down to just \$1,526.55 per litre.

But I am assured the average cost per litre will come down as we write off the capital (we have had plenty of practice at that).

8. PM should Eat Red Meat.

According to Karen Inge, head of nutrition at the Victorian Institute of Sport, iron deficiency is the reason behind Australia PM Kevin Rudd's rude behaviour.

"If you cut down on red meat it can reduce your iron levels. The major role of iron is to carry oxygen in the blood. If you have low oxygen it makes you tired. It's not rocket science. You only have to look at a child who is tired to see how cranky they are. When you are tired you don't often react in the best way possible," said Inge.

Opposition agriculture spokesman, John Cobb, said a lack of red meat explained the Prime Minister's "toddler tantrum" and why he was "as weak as a limp lettuce".

"Without iron in their diet a person will become pale, insipid, wishy-washy, anaemic and prone to outrageous outbursts. A lamb chop or beef steak would put colour in his cheeks and iron in his soul. If you denied me a chop, I'd have serious anger management issues," said Cobb.

How to eat More Vegetables?

What does a Damara eat? - green grass.
What is grass? - a green leafy vegetable. .
So damara meat is nothing more than
an efficient mechanism for delivering
green leafy vegetables into your system.

Thus an unidentified food nutritionist based at Rosevale
has advised
that just one damara lamb chop can give you
100% of your recommended daily allowance
of vegetables.

9. "Damaras are Tough Sheep"

Here is a quote from letter to us from a Senior Lecturer in the School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences, Charles Stuart University in Western Australia:

"I currently have a research student working with Damara sheep in the rangelands of WA. The project has been running for nearly three years. We were mainly interested in looking at diet selection by these animals. But what became of real interest to researchers here at Charles Sturt University is that, despite an incredible shortage of feed (plus drought and real overstocking), the sheep we were working with continued to not only have lambs but to rear them. The merino sheep on the neighbouring station gave up reproducing early on in the drought. Over the study period we have noticed the Damara ewes lose quite a bit of body condition and an awful lot of fat from their tails - but they are still getting pregnant - at least one lambing per year but some are doing 3 in two years.

"They certainly are tough sheep."

10. Where to get Damara Meat?

Dudley Leitch, probably the biggest damara breeder in Eastern Australia, is now supplying his own damara meat through his own abattoirs into his own butcher shops.

Where can you get it?

Try Bernie the Bargain Butcher at Woodridge Central Shopping Centre in Brisbane. Also try "Bernies" at Woodridge, Capalaba, Cannon Hill & Taigum as well as Executive Meats at Broadbeach, near the Bowls Club.

Or get some killers from Sherana and do your own.

Did you hear about the butcher
who backed into the meat grinder?
He got a little behind in his work?

11. The Sales Pitch – bargains time is here again.

Now is a good time to improve your genetics. We are continually improving our flock and have Damara, Dorper and Meatmaster breeders for sale at most times. We can give better value for money no matter what your budget or aims are.

Speaking of budgets, we will soon do our annual cull of aging sheep, which is always a time when you can get ewes cheap. Contact us if you have an interest. They are usually pregnant, and may go on for years – will still have not found out how long most damaras live – we have only had them for 10 years. Our oldest ewe now is 9.4 years old (and she is not for sale).

(PS. Dawie du Toit reminds us that we have two reasons to thank the people referred by some as “The Greatest Pastoralists in the World” – the Himba and Damara people of Namibia. Not only did they preserve Damara sheep, but their Sanga cattle were also one of the base breeds which, together with Red Polls, went into the gene pool that produced our Senepol Cattle.)

Beat That? The Sheep Olympics

- *Damara Ewe 158, 4.4 years old, 8 live lambs. (triplets in Feb 2008, twins in Sept 2008)*
- *Damara Ewe 211, 9.4 years old, 13 lambs and only one set of twins.*
- *Damara Ewe 132, aged 8.5 years, with 13 live lambs on the ground, one set of twins.*
- *Youngest Ewe Mother – “Eve” a Dorper ewe, had her first lamb at age 11.2 months.*
- *Damara Ram “Leopard” aged 9 yrs, with 367 lambs (he has been loafing with weaners).*

12. Feedback from an Angry Reader

“I am really angry with you folk as I have just spent my whole afternoon reading your entire site – yep the whole thing, all the Newsletters etc etc.”

13. Finally, remember, “All Sheep are Green”.

We in the ruminant industries are engaged in a life and death struggle with people dedicated to decimating farmers and their livestock. That Professor of Economics advising those lawyers and merchant bankers in Canberra wants us to raise kangaroos; Penny Wong wants us to turn our land over permanently to ferals and carbon forests; WWF wants us off the land entirely.

All in the cause of saving everything but us and our animals.

But all ruminants are green. They live on pastures, weeds and scrub that extract carbon dioxide from the air as they grow. As the green feed is digested in sheep stomachs, some carbon is returned to the atmospheric storehouse via farts, burps and breathing. If they die in the hills, the rest is returned. The carbon cycle of life is a zero sum game. Even over time nothing much has changed – the huge herds of bison, wildebeests, caribou, antelopes, wild cattle and sheep have just been replaced with tame herds. They are not causing build-up of CO₂ nor are they causing global warming.

(If you would like to read our most recent comment on Penny Wong’s Cap-n-Tax Scheme see: <http://carbon-sense.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/two-fatal-flaws.pdf>

So we need to understand the carbon cycle, improve our grazing management, look after our soils and our land, economise on energy use, minimise pollution and end every discussion with the Shepherd's Oath:

“All Sheep are Green”.



14. Mailing Lists

Please let us know before you change address. And let us hear your sheep stories.

From Mother-of-All-Things, Rouseabout, Fixit, Sheba the White Wolf, Waldo and Chad, the Llamas, Big Max, the Senepol, all the other Ovines and Bovines, and the lovely ladies of Goat Palace.

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