

Sherana Sheep Report No 14
“Breeding Better Sheep”
and other things.”
20/1/2010.

1. Breeding Better Sheep

Our aim in breeding cattle and sheep is to produce a line of meat animals that have the ability to survive in our environment, under our grazing conditions, with minimal assistance from us - that is, no chemical assistance for internal or external parasites, minimal feed supplementation, no birthing assistance, no shearing, no feet trimming and no abandoned lambs or calves. In addition we want animals that are easy to handle and that produce tasty meat on pasture with minimal supplementary feeding.

Of course that requires some intensive management from us in the artificial environment we force them to live. In a free environment, they could move to new areas when food and water became scarce and they could run and hide from predators and select from a wide variety of plants and soil types. In our confined paddocks – they need us to ensure they get unpolluted water and pasture, sufficient food, diverse food, adequate minerals and protection from large predators.

The key to breeding success lies in two areas:

- Strict selection of sires
- Ruthless culling of females

In many ways, the key to breeding success is selection of sires. One ram can change the characteristics of every lamb in the next lambing season, whereas one outstanding ewe will only influence one lamb next season (or 2 or 3 sometimes). So don't waste any time at all with an unsuitable ram – ditch him.

Ram selection has two aspects:

- Does the ram have the desired characteristics?
- Is his mother line the type we want to propagate?

We do not need much investigation of the ram's male line, unless we know that we made a bungle in ram selection some time back and allowed a dud to breed. Just make sure to maintain variety of breeding lines. However we do need to investigate and class his mother and grand-mother.



Bruce - a promising young Damara Ram

We now have a system of continuous assessment of breeding value. Every time we handle any flock, all numbers are recorded to ensure none have died or been killed by dogs or snakes, or lost a tag. Then every animal is classed on appearances into:

- R = Ram Quality, or good enough to produce a breeding ram for us.
- K = Keep, or good enough to make sure she stays in our flock.
- Nil = a good average ewe, can be kept or sold as a sound useful ewe.
- S = Sell, a ewe we prefer to remove from our breeding flock. Nothing wrong with her but not up to our current strict selection criteria.
- C = Cull, a ewe that we will send to auction – usually getting old, losing teeth, had lambing problems, slow breeder or barren, bad shape in mouth or feet, wild temperament, too much wool, susceptible to worms etc. Very few damaras get into this class except aged ones. Cross bred ewes and dorpers get culled more often.

When Mother of All Things puts the info on her computer, she may then override the Rouseabout classification (sometimes without any consultation, I may add) depending on breeding history, lambing problems, whether the ewe has ever been badly wormy or whether she is a particular pet of MOAT's. (Breeding management should be all hard logic and assessment, I tell her, but she says, "Yes, that's OK but you are not selling Muffi because she comes up to me every morning to say Hello.")

We now try to ensure that every ram we use to breed had a mother and preferably a grandmother with an "R" classification.

We have made continuous efforts to ensure we have a large range of pure damara genetics. We have purchased bloodlines from at least eight other breeders who did not get their original sheep from us. We now have sufficient diversity and sufficient numbers that we can start developing what we aim to make a really useful easy-care cleanskin sheep for Australian free range conditions. We predict that the time will come when every meat sheep breeder north of about Dubbo will have some damara blood in his flock. And there will be a diverse group of small breeders who love the damaras for their unusual qualities – their meat quality, their trouble free breeding, their flocking and survival instinct, their pretty and varied colours, their intelligence and their fertility and productivity.

So Sherana will always be a place where you can get the best damaras, and damaras guaranteed to be pure with zero infusion of any other breed to our knowledge. We use the same techniques with our dorpers, but progress is slower there because the original animal needed a lot of improvement for the environment we are planning. Right now we have three breeding flocks – pure damara, pure dorper and meatmasters. Eventually, the dorper/meatmaster flock will be heavily culled to produce just one flock that looks a lot like dorpers but performs a lot like damaras. They will be more docile damaras, perfect shedders, with wider bodies and looking more like a traditional sheep.

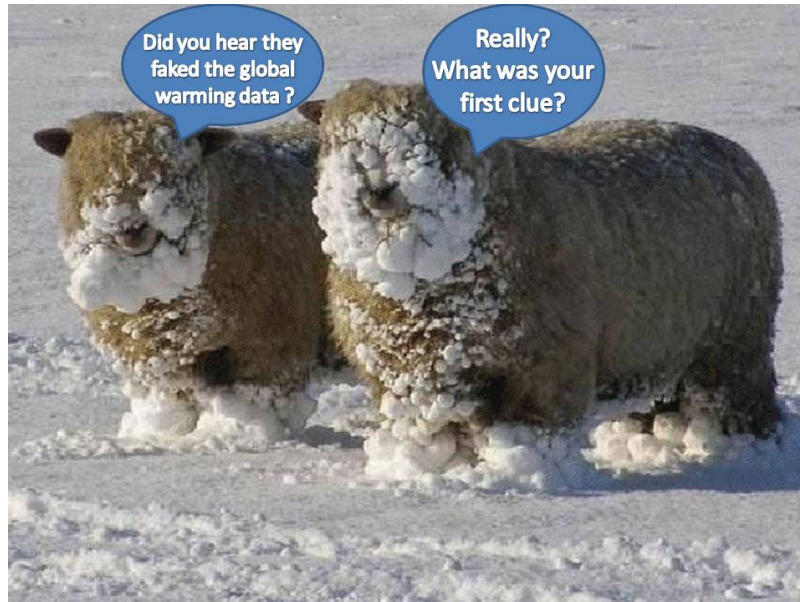
The worst thing that happens to any animal breed is show ring competitions. Immediately animals are no longer judged on the things that matter. They are judged solely on their appearance on show day – how well they have been fed, how carefully they have been shorn, how well they have been handled, shampooed and combed, and whether the judge is a good friend or wants to sell a ram to the exhibitor. None of these things are important when the new ram lands in a 20,000 acre paddock of scrub at Cunnamulla. So we do not intend to join the show circuit for any animal we breed. We will take animals for exhibition, but do nothing to encourage the development of show ring judging.

We are using the same breeding goals and techniques with our cattle, starting with the base breed of Braford's, and then infusing with Senepol blood. We aim at a stable breed now. Cattle breeding takes so much longer than sheep – we should have started 30 years ago! But we have some good bulls at last – Senepols and Braford Senepol cross. There are only young ones left now, but we are happy to sell them.

2. Damaras can adapt to Global Warming

As many of you know, we take this global warming threat seriously, and have communicated to our sheep that, like good scouts, they must "Be Prepared".

One breeder we supply has been quite successful in breeding sheep perfectly adapted to Global Warming. Here is a picture of two of his well adapted damara ewes:



Damaras Adapt quickly to Global Warming

3. Report on Celia

People keep asking for an update report on Celia. She is now 5.5 years old and has had 9 lambs. MOAT reports "She is looking fat and sleek and making a new baby". (Looks like she is not getting a "C" classification or even an "S" in the near future.)

4. The Cleanskin Sheep Symposium, Adelaide

People who breed dorpers, damaras, meatmasters, wiltshire and other "cleanskin sheep" are organising a symposium, sheep show and sale in Adelaide 18-19th February 2010. National and international speakers are scheduled. MOAT and Rouseabout are going. For more info see: <http://www.cleanskinsheep.com.au/internationalsympoevent.htm>

5. Goats Multiply

A year ago we had 5 goats. Now we have 10 and the Goat Palace is getting well used. Our total investment per goat has been reduced to just \$2,345.56.

So we are now expert at breeding goats. And we can now confidently state that, contrary to public opinion, Damaras do not look, act or perform like goats.

There are three separate breeds in the ovine world – Goats, Damaras, and other sheep.

In the goat world there are Dairy Goats (a very refined upper class and well behaved bunch), Boer Goats (the respectable hard working meat goats) and all the ferals.

We have learned one big thing about goats - **Bucks can do it through a fence**. How do we know? We have kept "Trader" the buck goat locked in a small paddock by himself and we deliver does to him at times of our choosing. All seemed to work perfectly and two sets of twins arrived exactly on time. Then one of the young does, who was not supposed to be pregnant, started showing distinct signs of pregnancy. MOAT knew immediately what had happened:

"That useless Rouseabout must have let them get together while I was away at the Ekka, and he did not tell me".

But it became clear that times did not add up for Ekka time so Rouseabout was cleared of the crime.

“Ah, must have been those caretakers, or even Fixit, when we were away?” said the ever vigilant MOAT.

As neither Fixit nor the caretakers were there to defend themselves, Rouseabout though that was a good verdict.

But then the kid arrived and the date was clearly within a time when MOAT was in charge. Oops.

Those two goats have never been in the same yard, but at times were separated solely by one high mesh fence. Lesson number one – Bucks can do it thru a fence.

Lesson number two, buck goatlings can start doing it at an impossibly young age (about 3 months). So now Toby the buck goatling has to be separated from all the ladies (even his mother) and from Trader, who tried to stomp him, and now lives happily with the bottlie lambs and lines up at the cafeteria milk bar for his bottle too.

That is about the limit of our knowledge of goats so far, but we are learning real quick.

6. The Tea Kays Multiply

Diligent readers will remember that we took delivery of 20 aged pure damara ewes from Longreach who had spent most of their life away from humans surviving in the bush. Just on six months from when the Tea Kay girls arrived, they started having lambs. We now have eleven Tea Kay lambs – new genetics for the future.

7. Birthing Problems and New Adventures

Some of the Tea Kay ewes were quite old – a couple had no teeth and so had a struggle with dry spear grass in the drought. One old girl not only survived with no teeth, but also got pregnant and was obviously close to lambing. Then she had a prolapse – the first prolapse we have even seen in damaras. We caught her, cleaned it up, and to our amazement managed to put it all back.

But next morning she was prolapsed again, and it seemed obvious that she was not going to survive the prolapse and a birthing. So we decided to put the old girl down quietly and humanely, and attempt to save her lamb.

No one on Sherana had ever attempted a caesarean birth before, but luckily we had a Vet student on vacation work with us, and she remembered from her lectures what side to attempt it from (lay the sheep on her right side and come in from the left side).

So we started the operation as quickly as possible. Success came quickly and a lamb was delivered by the Rouseabout, alive, and handed to the midwife. Then, a surprise, another lamb was discovered, also alive and delivered to the second mid-wife. Both midwives were then busy for ten minutes clearing airways and getting the babies to wake up to the new world (they were supposed to lick them clean, but failed in that job.) Unfortunately one lamb did not make it, but one did. Next day another very poor old Tea Kay ewe had twins, one the tiniest damara lamb we have ever seen. It soon became obvious that the ewe would not raise the twins so they joined the Caesar baby on the bottle. A month later a third very aged Tea Kay produced another tiny baby who also joined the cafeteria line up. All lambs thriving now. Rouseabout designed a bottle feeder so MOAT can now feed 4 lambs and one goatling at once.



8. Fixit Retires to the Beach – replacement needed

For years now we have been lucky to have an on-site toolmaker, mechanic, dishwasher and caretaker. But Fixit has decided to buy his own house on the North Coast, so we have a big hole in the Sherana establishment. We miss him.

We have a large un-occupied caravan on Sherana with all facilities and are now looking for a pensioner or retiree who would like to live in a caravan on a farm rent free. Does not matter much what you do to help as long as you fit in and help out a bit – mechanical, housework, sheep work, gardening, caretaking or odd jobs. If you know a trustworthy candidate we would like to hear.

We will never be so lucky as to replace Fixit, but you never know.

9. Feedback from Readers - Raising Orphan Lambs

Dear Viv & Judy

I have 3 ewe lambs at the moment, Ken is very against me keeping any but has conceded reluctantly to females this round. I have problems assimilating them back into the flock, but cannot leave them to die. I have argued that with the females they will more than return the cost to rear them, but he did question as I have quietly to myself, the issue of keeping for a breeder a lamb which has been abandoned for whatever reason by the mother. So I am so pleased that you have included Celia's story in your newsletter, so I can show cold hard statistics to Ken! While I did wonder about that, in my mind I do feel that a lamb that fights so hard to live, like the little one we found trudging the fence last, with her rough shaggy coat, swollen face and dried cord still attached, weighing less than a pound of butter but still jumping to flee from sudden movements, will impart upon its offspring a fighting spirit and resilience which will stand her in such good stead she could only be a better mum!!

We try not to get bottlies, but occasionally deliberately take one twin off a poor mother in a drought. This is what we have learned after raising many lambs:

- Do not bother raising rams – it is easy to make them vicious as they grow up, and they may not make the grade anyway. And MOAT will complain if you suggest eating them.
- Do not raise one lamb on its own – it will become neurotic and bleat every time you disappear.
- They are a lot of work and expense so make sure you accept that.
- But the ewe lambs grow up to be quiet, friendly sheep, nice to have in any flock.
- Wean them at 3 months and put them back in the weaner mob. Ignore their piteous bleating every time you appear - they must become sheep again.

10. Getting Good Meat

A recent visitor told us how he gets good meat – he hangs carcasses in the cold room at 1 deg for some five weeks. MOAT says “Yuk, the dog's kangaroo legs are green within 2 weeks. I'm not eating green sheep”.

So she got a lecture on how all sheep are green.

“I took my wife to a restaurant. The waiter, for some reason took my order first. “I'll have the steak, medium rare, please.”

He said, “Aren't you worried about the mad cow”

“Nah, she can order for herself.”

And then the fight started...

11. “Speculating in Sheep” – by Ron Kitching

Ron was a drilling contractor and he saw every corner of outback Australia in his long career. Here is Ron’s story about Fred Tritton of “Silver Plains”, near Richmond in Queensland, Australia.

As is usually the case, years ago (probably in the 1960’s) there was a horrendous drought in Queensland. Then wool fell to the lowest price since before the Korean war started.

The sale yards at Richmond in NW Queensland had a record number of sheep for sale. The auctioneer called for bids on lot one. Not a murmur of response stirred the air.

Then the same thing happened with every lot there was and there was not a bid made. The Auctioneer was frantic, as were the poor devils selling trying to get enough to hang on until the drought broke.

One enterprising squatter, Fred Tritton, called out, “Put up the lot and see if you can get a bid”.

So, in desperation the auctioneer called for bids for the thousands of head available. I have forgotten the figure but it was something like one and six a head (15 cents), that Fred bid. To his surprise the entire yarding was knocked down to him.

Fred beetled off to his bank manager to make sure his cheque would be covered. The Bank Manager was furious and did not want to back Fred.

But Fred was very persuasive and got the cover for his cheque.

Again I have forgotten the number of sheep involved, but as the entire district was up for sale it was an enormous number. Something like 35,000 sheep comes to mind.

Fred’s wife was beside herself with worry and gave Fred a hard time over his impulsive action. Fred retorted calmly that: “They might as well die on Silver Plains as anywhere else.”

Silver Plains is only about 10 or 15 minutes drive from the town. Soon after all of the sheep were ensconced on Fred’s place it rained. The best rains for many years. It was good steady rain for days on end. Dams were filled, creeks ran and the grass grew. A week after the rain, wool recovered and leapt to heights that had not been seen since the record prices at the outbreak of the Korean war.

Fred then went into the sheep selling business. Something like six pounds a head comes to mind for the average sale price. Fred’s Bank Manager thought Fred a genius. Fred paid off his overdraft and had piles left over. He built the town’s first Motel. Mum had her own new car, a pearl necklace and a diamond ring.

Fred was not a niggardly person in any respect whatsoever. He became the town’s Mayor and regularly made learned announcements about all things economic.

He was a genuine good egg, and was highly regarded as the district’s greatest entrepreneur.

As the great economist/social scientist, Ludwig von Mises once said, all entrepreneurial activity carries risk and luck sometimes plays an important part in entrepreneurial endeavours.

12. Flies, Ticks and Other Parasites

Subject: FW: An Important Tick Warning from MOAT



TICK WARNING!

I hate it when people forward bogus warnings, and I have even done it myself a couple times unintentionally but this one is real, and it's important.

Please send this warning to everyone on your e- mail list.

If someone comes to your front door saying they are checking for ticks due to the warm weather and asks you to take your clothes off and dance around with your arms up,

**DO NOT DO IT!! THIS IS A SCAM!!
They only want to see you naked.**

I wish I'd gotten this yesterday. I feel so stupid.

13. Sheep can Talk

We use rotation grazing with our sheep flocks – better for the pasture and better for the sheep. And the sheep understand the system very well.

After about three days in a paddock, all the ice cream pasture is gone and they are eating the sheep equivalent of uncooked broccoli. As they leave the night paddock at dawn to go back to their day paddock you can hear a few sheep grumbling as they trudge along sadly – deep low unhappy long drawn out baaaa, baaaa, which means “Surely she is not taking us back to that dead paddock? There is no feed left in that paddock. Why don't we revolt?”

Then as they turn the corner in the lane and the leaders see a new paddock gate is open, the chatter changes immediately and spreads to the whole flock – it becomes a happy excited “Ba, ba, ba – we are going to a new paddock – yippie let's run, and they do”.

14. Sheep Galore

Every year we go through this cycle. It rains (well most years it rains). Then grass grows, sheep get fat and become pregnant. Five months later we are back in drought and heaps of lambs are getting born. We struggle thru the drought and nobody wants to buy sheep. Then it rains again grass grows and everyone wants to buy sheep.

The grass is green now, so if you want some lawnmowers, pets, killers or breeders act quickly as the best sheep sell first. We have ewes, rams, weaners and wethers.

Now is also the time we cull the flocks, so if you are looking for cheap sheep, we can probably find something. You can nominate preferred price or preferred quality, not both!

15. Finally, a note on Iodine and a Reminder that “All Sheep are Green”.

We sold a few sheep a while back and about 3 weeks later the buyer told us they were showing signs of goitre – a swelling of their thyroid gland (about their Adam’s apple) caused by an iodine deficiency. They must have been a bit deficient when they left us, and it became obvious on a new diet even more deficient than ours. It alerted us to a potential problem.

Then we got goats and found that, because many goats are fed a lot of lucerne hay, this also causes iodine deficiency. Iodine deficiency is very common in Australia’s old leached soils, so supplementation with seaweed meal is advised. In chronic cases, drenching with potassium iodide in solution helps, but this can be dangerous in excess. We have also used a lick block from 4 Season Company Pty Ltd called “Trace Elements + Double Iodine”. They also make a useful High Sulphur Block. Many of our soils and pastures are deficient in sulphur.

All of our plants and animals get their mineral nutrition from the soil, and if your soil is deficient, your animals, your food products and you will also be deficient. Mineral nutrition is probably the most important aspect of maintaining animal (and human) health.

Finally, a reminder also that there are still people seeking excuses to banish farmers and their animals from the land in favour of returning our land to brigalow, eucalypt weeds and kangaroos. Make sure you understand that every grazing animal gets every atom of carbon they emit from the grass, which gets it from the air. A flock of sheep is just as green as any forest – both take every bit of carbon in their bodies from the air and the soil. The carbon cycle is a zero sum game. It is a terrible indictment of our agricultural scientists that idiot economists and environmental academics from Canberra and Adelaide can keep mouthing nonsense about animal emissions without challenge. (New readers may wish to read: “Green Sheep in the Brave New World” at: <http://www.damaras.com/newsletters/200805.pdf>)

So we need to understand the carbon cycle, improve our grazing management, and end every discussion with the Shepherd’s Oath:

“All Sheep are Green”.



16. Mailing Lists

Remember to let us know if you change your email address, or if you do not want to keep getting this newsletter.

Bye for now.

Best Wishes for Easter or Christmas (depending on when this gets sent)

From Mother-of-All-Things, Rouseabout, Sheba the White Wolf, Chad the Camelid, Trader, the Buck who can do it thru the fence, Big Max, the Senepol and all the other Ovines and Bovines.

Viv & Judy Forbes

Phone: 07 5464 0533,

www.damaras.com,

Email: vforbes@bigpond.com