

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF INTRODUCING  
RABBITS INTO FARM PRACTICES

BY

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The experiences that are discussed in this paper are mainly those that have been with the Ghanaian for whom, from time immemorial, rabbit breeding has been a way of dealing with perennial meat shortage. The Ghanaian rural dweller knows the value of meat proteins as proven dietetic requirements and the dangerous consequences of low protein in-take to his bodily development.

Such situation naturally leads to a search for quick producing animals for food. The Ghanaian rural dweller therefore was quick to develop an interest in the breeding of rabbits for food and has historically exhibited no aversion to rabbit-meat.

In Ghana the rabbit is bred in colonies in natural style as a family food animal and used as protein meat of great delicacy. It is popular with the rural folk because it can be fed on grass over which it does not vie with man. The rabbit is a quiet animal, takes little space and increases rapidly. Because of its increasing popularity, back-yard meat rabbit industries are developing in many parts of the country. This is the direct result of the efforts of the National Rabbit Project of the Government of Ghana.

Religion has for long influenced the dietary habits of people. Thus the Moslem does not eat pork and the cow is taboo to the strict Buddhist.

The Ghanaian society has no religious inhibition against the consumption of rabbit-meat which on the contrary is accepted as venison of great palatability and delicacy. Indeed it is so accepted throughout western, central and southern Africa where for thousands of years, rabbit production for meat in colonies in the home-warrens has been an age-old practice.

Rabbit-meat for food in Africa can therefore be said to have become a major protein break-through.

Our experiences in Africa also indicate that the ready acceptability of the rabbit into farming practice is due to the fact that rabbit raising is not inhibited by the usual factors that limit the production of large animals. Cattle, sheep and goats need large tracts of land for pasture. They offer strong competition to man for such human food as maize and other cereals. These two factors alone impose severe limitations to the raising of large animals in several parts of Africa. To such an audience as you constitute this does not need further elaboration.

On the other hand, rabbit production requires very little space. The rabbit can eat a wide variety of fibrous plants over which it does not compete with man. The popular acceptance of rabbit raising in many parts of Africa stem from such considerations.

Another circumstance making for the popularity of rabbit raising in Africa is the fact that the rabbit is a safe animal to breed from the epidemiological point of view. The rabbit cannot be accused of spreading such dangerous diseases as anthrax, rinderpest, trypanosomiasis, bilharzia, guinea-worm; it does not carry such dangerous parasites as round or tape worms.

The introduction of rabbits into farming practices has been found to present no health hazards.

Furthermore, cocks crow, sheep and goats bleat, geese and hens cackle and the noisy guinea fowls are most unpopular in the suburbs for the din they raise. But the rabbit does not create a noisy environment. Back-yard rabbit-meat industries are fast developing in Africa on account of these two factors - safety as far as public health is concerned, and the fact that the rabbit is a quiet animal.

The comparatively low capital investment involved in rabbit raising has also contributed to its popularity in Africa especially among the small-scale farmers and back-yard operators. The risk of loss resulting from death has also been found to be low compared with experiences with other farm creatures. On the other hand, the returns are substantial and quick for the market farmer as rabbits multiply fast. All these considerations have made it easy to introduce rabbit breeding into farm practices in Africa.

Let me now return from the general to the particular and elaborate a bit our Ghanaian experience which is at once exciting and challenging. Animal protein supply in the Ghanaian diet has been deficient for years. During the past two decades, meat production has not kept pace with population growth and bush-meat, which supplied a substantial portion of Ghanaian meat requirements in the past is now hard to come by. The country is now faced with the problem of finding alternative sources of meat supply locally to feed the increasing population and help conserve Foreign Exchange.

Among the many measures so far taken by Government to deal with the problem was its decision, six years ago, to promote scientific rabbit production in Ghana. The result was the establishment of the National Rabbit "Pilot" Project in October 1972.

The Project is established on a 32-hectare farm at Kwabenya some 24 kilometers outside Accra. From an original stock of 80 the farm currently houses some 7,000 rabbits. Thousands of rabbits have gone from the Farm to the back-yards of Ghana and the calculations are that some five million rabbits are consumed annually by Ghanaians.

The farm grows its own sugar-cane, sorghum, guinea grass and cassava for rabbit food. It has a staff of about 70 persons of various categories. When it reaches capacity, the farm will have about 3,000 hutches and employ about 200 persons.

However, the success story of the Ghana National Rabbit "Pilot" Project has brought problems in its trail. These stem from the popularity of rabbit-meat and the heavy demand for breeding-stock by would-be breeders. The solution lies in the provision of adequate Foreign Exchange to move the Project from the pilot stage to its final phase. In its determination to encourage protein meat production in Ghana, the Government has done its best to support the pilot phase of the National Rabbit Project, but, as with most developing countries, Foreign Exchange constraints have limited the scope of direct Government commitment.

From the Ghana experience, therefore, the rabbit answers the need for supplementing the protein-meat supply of the African family. No adverse sociological aspects have been observed which militate against the introduction of rabbits into farm practices.

The related problems all seem to revolve on finance, especially Foreign Exchange, for:-

- (a) regular procurement of high-grade varieties of stock for reproduction with hardy local breeds;
- (b) provision of more enduring hutches;
- (c) provision of rolls and rolls of thick diamond-metal floor-mesh for the hutches;
- (d) provision of veterinary drugs and additives;
- (e) provision of rabbit-feed/pellets and concentrates during the period of acclimatization of imported breeds; and
- (f) purchase of portable irrigation machines for the rabbit feed farms.

Given maximum support, the Ghana National Rabbit Project can in turn assist in closing the protein gap by extending aid to farmers and back-yard breeders by way of cheap parent-stock, drugs and additives as well as the extension of information and advisory services.

This paper will not be complete, if mention is not made of another problem we have observed in connection with rabbit breeding in Ghana.

This is also not sociological but psychological and is perhaps international. The problem has to do with extreme affection for the rabbit as a pet by fanciers. For the love of breeding beautiful exhibition animals, some keen breeders cannot bear to slaughter their animals for food or see others kill them to be eaten. It is this expensive luxury attitude that presents a certain amount of problem in Ghana.

But the problem soon solves itself and is solved not by man but the rabbit itself. It is solved by the rabbits' extraordinary reproductive ability! The kind-hearted Ghanaian breeder with open hands make gifts of his over-bred rabbits to members of his extended family and friends, thus unconsciously releasing them for consumption as food once the animals leave his rabbitry.

That problem having taken care of itself, I should like to end by re-stating that no sociological problems militating against the introduction of rabbits in farm practices have been observed in Ghana. In all my years of broiler table-meat rabbit production, I have yet to meet ten people who have an aversion to rabbit-meat as there are thousands in the case of pork. On the contrary, the popular desire by many in Ghana is to experience the palatability of rabbit-meat. Once they have tasted it, like the legendary Oliver Twist, they continue to ask for more!

Thank You.

METHODS OF SMALLHOLDER RABBIT PRODUCTION 1/

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S U M M A R Y

- (1) As far as I am concerned, I know of no sociologically adverse aspects for introducing Rabbits into Farm Practices.
- (2) If there are problems, they should be related to those underlying factors, namely:-
  - (a) The need for funds for the expansion of more Rabbit Projects and thousands of back-yard rabbitries in support of the break-through now being experienced and proved in Ghana; and
  - (b) Aid to the back-yard and commercial breeders by way of cheap parent-stock, drugs and additives to make it possible for more and more people in the slender income group to produce, through the breeding of rabbits, quick and rich protein-meat for their families - thus forcing down the cost of other meats they need to eat for variety and good health.

SUMMARY

A number of problems which may impede rabbit production in developing countries are enumerated. The approach of the Bunda College Rabbit Research Project to the problems of housing and facilities, breeding, alternative feedstuffs and disease are described along with examples of possible solutions to each problem. It is concluded that smallholder rabbit production is possible in the Central Region of Malawi but further work must be carried out before widespread introductions are made.

INTRODUCTION

Under high levels of management, a single doe should produce 32 offspring resulting in an output as much as 58 kg edible meat per year (Templeton, 1968). This high productivity, coupled with a ability to produce on feeds which are not in direct dietary competition with humans, gives the rabbit tremendous potential as a source of high quality animal protein. The value of rabbits as meat source in developing countries has been recognized and several projects have been initiated in these areas to promote rabbit production or to investigate methods of rabbit production which are less sophisticated and less capital intensive than the systems used in developed countries (Owen, Morgan and Barlow, 1977).

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