

Exposing the myths about goats

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In this article he proposes the hypothesis that myths in the goat industry are impeding the development of the industry towards maturity. Some might dispute the relevance of some of these myths to the Boer goat and we invite our readers to respond in the future issues.

There are many myths which are alive and well in Australasia concerning goat production. Some exist because of no analysis, some exist from poor analysis, some are misinterpretations, and others are half truths. Many have a basis of fact but need to be closely examined to extract the "element of truth". Many of these truths contradict the widely held misconceptions and prejudice which surround goat husbandry in Australia. Nine such myths are briefly discussed.

Myth 1

Goats are hardy.

This has misled many people into framing goats in extreme environments such as degraded semi-arid scrub, high rainfall tall eucalyptus forests, degraded dry woodland overgrown with unpalatable native regrowth, often with disastrous results for the goats and financial loss for the owners. Improving our husbandry practices would help goats become more hardy.

Myth 2

Goats are browsers.

The bald statement that goats are browsers is misleading and inaccurate. Goats are intermediate or mixed feeders. Goats have evolved as very adaptable and flexible feeders. The fact that goats can browse more than sheep does not mean goats are exclusively browser any more than the fact that sheep can browse more than cattle means sheep are exclusively browsers. Goats and sheep are both capable of browsing. Goats are more adaptable and flexible feeders than sheep.

Myth 3

Goats are less selective than sheep.

Myth 4

Goats will eat anything.

Taken together these myths epitomise myopic, lazy and uncritical observations about goats. Despite the frequency with which goats are

reported to have "eaten" or more correctly chewed clothes on clothesline, carpets hung out to dry, etc. in dietary terms goats do not eat everything. They change their good preferences from grass to clover from short pasture to long pasture, from grass to weeds, from weeds to bushes, from leaves to shoots, etc., depending on availability of the herbage, stage of growth and digestibility of the herbage. One of the reason feral goats can live in degraded areas of semi-arid scrubland in Australia is because they have very selective eating habits, consuming young shoots in preference to woody stems, young leaves in preference to old leaves and consuming shoots and leaves on bushes and tress in preference to old leaves and consuming shoots and leaves on bushes and tress in preference to only eating dead grass.

Myth 5

The stocking rate of goats is 30% greater than the stocking rate of sheep.

This myth can be very dangerous, not only for the welfare of goats, but for the financial success of enterprises. It has often been used as a "correction factor" in gross margin analysis. Its use in this way sometimes resulted in a gross margin for goats being adjusted from worse than one for sheep to one better than sheep. There are elements of truth in this myth in some environments. In southern Africa and Texas with more palatable browse than often found in Australia and with different strains of sheep, the stocking of goats can be 30% greater than the stocking rate of sheep. In these environments substantial amounts of browse are available for goats which are not well utilised by sheep. Stocking rates and reproductive rates of livestock in these environments are also low compared to most of Australia's wheat-sheep and high rainfall zones. In Australia this 'myth' may be true in some environments such as semi-arid scrublands but no objective data is available yet. Based on experimental observations in Victoria in order to minimise internal parasite problems, it is recommended that breeding goats be grazed at <8DSE/ha and that the balance of grazing capacity be used by sheep, cattle or cropping.

Myth 6

To a fully stocked property you can add an additional 10% of goats without affecting carrying capacity.

Very dangerous on pasture lands where no browse exists! The promotion of goats by the

Myths in goat production

use of this myth has been counter-productive in the farming community, as “cynical” farmers know you can’t get something for nothing. Department of Agriculture have rammed “recommended stocking rates” and stocking rate experiments down the necks of innovative farmers for 20 odd years. Incredulously they heard that an additional 10% of goats was no extra trouble. The proviso is that goats are carefully managed and given preferential grazing ahead of sheep and cattle.

Myth 7

You can’t get a goat fat.

Generally based on observations of dairy goats or young kids which have very little subcutaneous fat. Goats have different distributions of fat in their bodies compared to sheep. They have a lower proportion of total body fat as subcutaneous fat and a higher proportion as internal fat (visceral, oriental and kidney fat) compared to sheep. Carcase fatness of goats is related to carcase weight, body condition score, nutritional treatment, stocking rate, liveweight and sex. Heavier goats in good body condition are much fatter than light goats in poor body condition. Many commentators have compared small goats with larger sheep thus confounding species differences with carcase weight of differences. Boer goats are a breed that can tend to obesity.

Myth 8

Goats need roughage for best growth.

Roughage as defined by the Macquarie Dictionary means “the less nutritive parts”. These are the “parts” which goats usually select against. Goats select against old blackberry stems, woody stems on most bushes, coarse cereal straw, stemmy lucerne hay and white clover.

Most Australians now know something of the need for roughage or fibre in human diets. Most Australians know nothing about animal nutrition. In animal science, roughage as opposed to concentrate diets are composed of whole or processed grains with a limited amount of roughage. Generally, forage diets have higher levels of fibre and lignin, and lower digestible energy concentrations than concentrate diets.

Productivity of goats is maximised when goats are fed diets of high digestibility which enable high levels of digestible energy intake and contain sufficient nitrogen and trace minerals. Such diets enable animals to grow or lactate at high levels of performance.

Myth 9

Goats are internal parasite hazards to sheep.

This is often stated in relation to one of two situations:

- (a) The introduction of drench resistant parasites onto “clean” properties by goats, or
- (b) The observations that goats appear to harbour more parasites and excrete more parasite eggs in their faeces than adult sheep.

In relations to (a), exactly the same observations can be made of sheep and cattle being introduced from drench resistant properties. There are far more sheep properties which have never seen goats which have drench resistance problems than there are goats properties. Obviously sheep owners need to be on the alert about drench resistant parasites if they are going to purchase goats but this is equally so if they purchase rams, ewes or wethers.

Recent studies have indicated that goats metabolise various anthelmintics at rates different to sheep. Current treatment programs for helminths may inadvertently underdose thus contributing to the development of resistant parasites. Parasitologists are well aware that severe environmental conditions can cause serious parasitism in adult sheep and cattle which under better conditions would be immune to such disease outbreaks. However few have expressed sympathy with the so-called “hazardous” goats until recent years. Goats are very sensitive when green feed is less than 3cms high, in cold wet conditions and when shorn twice yearly or mid winter. It is no surprise that when overstocked and poorly fed, parasitism becomes a major problem in goats.

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Article from Issue 12 of Boer Briefs
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