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Donkeys as an alternative draft power source for women in Kavango, Namibia

by

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Abstract

Women carry out many tasks in Kavango region which could be more easily undertaken with the aid of donkeys. Although donkeys are used by some women for agricultural and transport purposes their potential is not fully exploited. This paper reviews the current situation regarding the use of donkeys by women and indicates the extension and training support measures which are being put in place.

Introduction

Kavango is one of the northern regions in Namibia that is experiencing low agricultural production due to insufficient farm power and lack of appropriate technologies. Poor seasonal rainfall distribution over the past few years has also contributed to the widespread poverty among the 15,000 farming households made up of approximately 136,000 people (Starkey, 1992).

The majority of farmers (60–70%) in Kavango use draft animal power to grow their staple crop, pearl millet. Oxen are the most widely used draft animals. Animal traction in Kavango tends to be a male-dominated technology. Plowing is mostly done by men while women carry out subsequent field activities, such as planting and weeding, mainly by hand. However, it is not rare to find women working with draft animals. In areas where men migrate to towns to work, it is common for women to be responsible for all farm operations including the use and management of draft animals.

However, women's access to oxen is generally limited due to the costs of oxen and implements and because women generally do not own cattle themselves. Also, some women appear to be afraid to work with oxen and to be near these big animals that often have long horns. Donkeys are normally more acceptable and women find them friendly to work with. They are also cheaper than oxen in terms of initial cost and daily maintenance. This paper reviews the use of donkeys in Kavongo with particular reference to their possible greater use by women.

Background

An area of approximately 29 000 ha is cultivated in Kavango using draft animal power and tractors. There are 20 000 oxen which are used mainly for plowing and transport. Other animal power sources available are donkeys and horses. It is estimated that there are 500 donkeys and 500 horses. The 500 donkeys are mostly found in the western, central and eastern parts of the region. These donkeys were introduced into Kavango a long time ago through farmer migrations especially from the North Central Region of Namibia. Most originated from commercial farms where they became redundant when the white settlers mechanised their operations.

Management of donkeys

Donkeys in Kavango are commonly used for transport using carts and more recently as pack animals and for riding. The use of donkeys for cultivation is rare although some farmers use donkeys to plow their fields when no other source of power is available.

Farmers' knowledge of donkey harnessing is poor and their way of harnessing is often cruel. Surprisingly farmers who use yokes on donkeys appear not to have problems with their harnessing system. Some farmers yoke donkeys together with oxen.

During the night, especially during the cropping season, donkeys are kept in separate kraals similar to those used for cattle. During the day they graze together with cattle. Donkeys are never treated for diseases, nor dosed against internal parasites. Most donkey owners castrate their male donkeys at a young age, using a knife.

Most farmers in the region see themselves as cattle-keepers and many hesitate to purchase donkeys because they fear neighbours might consider them as poor people. Donkey meat is not

consumed in the region, therefore many farmers do not see a reason for keeping donkeys. There are many negative attitudes associated with donkeys. However, donkeys are cheaper than cattle and cost 150–300 Namibian dollars (US$ 35–70) per head compared to N$ 500–1000 (US$ 110–220) per head for cattle.

Donkeys: an alternative source of farm power for rural women

Rural women in Kavango do most of the farm operations. They transport cattle manure in baskets on their heads and broadcast it over the land before the rainy season. Weeding with hand hoes is mostly done by women. After a day of weeding women load bundles of firewood on their heads and carry them home to use as fuel for cooking. Another daily activity of women is water collection.

With the improved, lighter weeding implements presently available, donkeys could be used and handled by women to weed crop fields. Demonstrations on weeding with animal power could be done with donkeys, as well as oxen. Donkeys could transport firewood, water and cattle manure, and women could benefit from the use of donkey carts. Donkeys could also make life easier by being ridden for journeys such as going to the clinic or hospital. The importance of donkeys could certainly be greater in remote areas where transport by car is hazardous or unavailable.

To improve donkey power utilisation in Kavango region there is a need for more extension and training inputs through the agricultural extension system. Donkeys could be included in the animal power programme currently established at Mashare Agriculture Development Institute. Short courses on animal power and the use of donkey implements and equipment are required. With the increasing usage of donkeys, rural women will have the time to participate more fully in community development.

Conclusions

Considering the many possibilities for donkey use by rural women it is clear that there exists much untapped potential which if realised could benefit many households in Kavango.

Reference

Starkey P, 1992. *Animal power in Namibia: present status and programme requirements*. Animal Traction Development, 64 Northcourt Avenue, Reading, UK. 59p.

Photograph (opposite): When celebrating national Freedom Day in 1997, President Nelson Mandela entered the stadium at Upington on a donkey cart.
Photo: Stephen Lawrence

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