

Rabbits: small animals for small spaces

Rabbits are productive and easy-to-keep animals that can recycle grasses and crop wastes into high-quality protein. Backyard rabbit-keeping requires little space and few external inputs. As Ateh Eugene explains, for these reasons and more, Heifer Project International (HPI) is promoting rabbit-keeping in Cameroon.

Ateh Eugene

Since 1982, HPI and the Institute of Zootechnical Research in Bamenda, the capital city of Northwest Province, have been training farmers to keep rabbits. There are now about 2000 rabbit farmers in and around Bamenda. Through the courses, extension by staff and farmers, field days, small agricultural shows and individual and village competitions, knowledge and skills in rabbit keeping are spreading rapidly. Each trained farmer receives rabbits from HPI on loan and is obliged to "pass on the gift" by giving some offspring to newly trained farmers and by helping advise them.

Why rabbits?

Raising rabbits offers numerous advantages for both urban and rural dwellers with limited resources, including:

- **Prolificacy.** Rabbits have a very short gestation period (27-33 days) and can rebreed immediately after giving birth. A breeding doe (female), if well managed under simple conditions, can produce at least 5 litters/year with an average of 6 kits/litter, i.e., 30 kits/doe/year. With 15% mortality at most, about 25 of the kits will reach maturity. A 6-person family with only 3 does can thus easily eat 4 rabbits of 3 kg each per month and still have some left to sell.
- **Nutritional qualities.** Rabbit meat is tasty and nutritious. It is low in fat, sodium and cholesterol compared to other common meats and is a rich source of protein, energy, minerals and vitamins (Lukefahr 1992). Because of its relatively small size, a rabbit can provide enough meat for one or two family meals, so that storage facilities, such as refrigeration, are not needed.
- **Efficient use of forage.** Rabbits convert feed efficiently into meat and can consume a wide range of feeds. Unlike poultry and pigs, they do not compete with humans for food, as they can eat kitchen leftovers, weeds and farm by-products. In Bamenda, where mean annual rainfall is 2500 mm and mean daily temperature 20E C, a small 25 x 25 m plot of Brachiaria and Guatemala (fodder grasses) planted beside the rabbitry can greatly reduce the labour involved in seeking green fodder, especially in the dry season. For optimal rabbit growth and reproduction, the leaves should be supplemented with concentrates. Costs for these can be reduced by mixing simple on-farm supplements with residues of maize, soybean and rice crops, by-products such as bone, and salt.
- **Integration.** Rabbits can be integrated with crops and other small animals. Not only do rabbits eat crop residues, their droppings and urine provide manure for crops, thus reducing the need for purchased fertilisers. According to a survey by the HPI Cameroon staff (Nuwanyakpa 1993), rabbits and guinea pigs complement each other. Guinea pigs kept on the floors of rabbit houses scavenge on scraps of forage which drop from rabbit cages, thus helping to keep the house clean. The sounds and odour of the guinea pigs also keep rats away.

- **Flexible management.** Rabbits are easily managed by women, children, disabled and the aged, whereas large animals require strength to restrain them. Herd size can be adjusted to the available space, feed and labour. Small animals like rabbits can readily be sold when the family needs cash, and thus serve as a "living saving accounts".
- **Low-cost system.** Rabbit keeping does not require much capital for investment and maintenance. Simple hutches with cheap feeders and drinkers can be constructed with bamboo or planks. As little space is needed, most rabbits in town are kept in the backyard or in abandoned sheds.
- **Easy health care.** With good sanitation and feeding, many rabbit diseases can be avoided in a small backyard rabbitry. The rabbit is basically a healthy animal if the farmer carries out simple measures to prevent disease. Unlike more common livestock species, rabbits do not need routine vaccination or prophylactic drugs to maintain good health (Lukefahr 1992). Many common rabbit diseases can be controlled by traditional veterinary practices.

Towns and rabbits

Inadequate food production is a major problem in Africa, especially in towns. The small areas of unbuilt land are used, where possible, for cropping, leaving little room for large grazing animals. The only food-producing animal that can be raised in these circumstances is one that can survive on cut grasses and by-products, requires little space for housing and is highly productive. These are qualities of the rabbit. The rabbit can be raised quite close to living quarters because it makes little noise and is not a health hazard. There are usually no laws prohibiting the keeping of rabbits in towns, unlike many other livestock species. A backyard rabbitry can serve as a good source of family income, food and employment, thus reducing poverty, hunger and idleness - three common problems in towns.

Not without limitations

Despite the rabbit's promising potential, there are still some problems related to nutrition, disease, genetics and high labour needs. Since much less research has been done on rabbits than other animals, little information is available on optimal feeding, breeding, disease prevention and management systems. But the future is bright for rabbit keeping. The increasing research interest should help solve many current problems of rabbit producers. Moreover, high-income markets are opening up, as recognition of the nutritional qualities leads to marketing of rabbit meat as a "health food" (Cheek et al 1982).

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