

Report on Northern Cape – finding goats lost in the Karoo



As part of the Goat Agribusiness Project (GAP) work, we have been looking for models of commercial goat farming that could be replicated with our African farmers. The common refrain is to go to the Karoo as this is where all the goat farming in South Africa happens. Even the national goat working group is held in Middleburg in the Karoo. The project planned to visit this area to get a sense of farming and goat numbers as well as understand what problems farmers are facing in this area. The project is part of a working group looking at future extension models and employment creation for land reform beneficiaries. Meeting farmers in the Karoo is much more complicated than it would seem and after much correspondence we were able to reconnect with Roberta Burgess who used to work for the Agriculture Research Council (ARC) on innovation support and now is the Manager of Research at the Department of Agriculture Livestock unit in the Northern Cape. She suggested we time our visit to coincide with the annual capture of the Tankwa goat population. This visit took place at the beginning of August 2019.

We planned to visit the Tankwa goat project, meet local communal and commercial sheep and goat farmers and understand the speculator and transport sector for goats from the Karoo and Namibia as our 2017 visit to Namibia had only been able to illustrate the industry up to the Namibian border with many unanswered questions after the visit.



The Tankwa goats are goats that escaped from local farmers up to 80 years ago and were “recently” discovered. The Parks Authorities put out a tender to exterminate them from the park in 2007. A

senior departmental official Thinus Jonker at the Department of Agriculture asked rather that they get preserved on the Carnarvon Research Station. They are kept here isolated from humans with no veterinary interventions or food supplementation. The genes are seen as worth preserving as they are unlike most local herds and have particular resistance to have survived in this harsh environment for so long. The capturing of the goats from the Tankwa National Park is a story in itself as none of the conventional traps or hunting worked.



Carnarvon is one of the many small towns in the Karoo with a dwindling farming industry. Unemployment means the towns residents hang around the local bottle store from early in the morning and the town generally feels like it is fading into the Karoo. A huge rudimentary graveyard seems to be the only thing growing.

The only excitement in town is the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) telescope being built near the town but it seems most farmers mutter about the SKA cutting off their cell phone coverage and road access. The *Square Kilometre Array (SKA)* project is an international effort to build the world's largest radio telescope. It will test theories of dark matter and general relativity.



The goats are herded by a huge staff, volunteers and scientists who all come through for the two-day get together. As these goats are left wild, there is no clear idea about how many goats there are and what their productivity is. There are estimates of somewhere between 300-700 goats. This herd in these pictures is only one of three herds kept in separate camps.





This huge team of scientists, helpers, veterinarians and farm labourers, catch each goat and follow FAO protocols- taking a picture, blood and DNA samples, various measurements and weigh each goat. They also take embryos and semen from a randomised selection of goats in the herd. This is all towards describing the genetics and variability inside the herd as well as preserving the genetics for future generations. The goats are like large shaggy wild animals. They jump and start every time humans approach and mill in circles. This is the vision of the project, to some degree, to keep them hardy and wild. As they are let out, they scatter into the rocky landscape running hard till they can no longer see or hear the human throng. They are truly wild and beautiful things.



The thought of using rams from this herd to build up the size and resistance of local indigenous herds owned by African communal farmers has not been considered or seen as a priority. To this point, we had some preliminary discussions about bringing in rams to test out farmers in the GAP project. As the most common problem brought up by communal farmers is the size of the goats which is why they try and breed with Boer goats and here is a herd of indigenous with much the same size as Boer goats living in almost unimaginably harsh conditions. As there are no internal or external parasitic challenges this part of the Karoo, one must assume that they have little or no resistance, but this needs to be tested. The same might be true of diseases commonly found in communal herds and zoonotic problems.

Although the project continues. The sad news is that Mr Thinus Jonker, who made the Tankwa research project, happen is taking early retirement. Above is a picture of him and Roberta above watching 'his' goats for one last time.



And so, we are off to see the rest of the karoo in areas we are assured that is full of goat farmers and goats. We drive through the dirt roads connecting Carnarvon to Upington. Kilometres and kilometres of Karoo scrub that slowly turns to bush as the Karoo yields to the Kalahari. Scattered herds of Boer goats here and there but generally you only see sheep. And even these only on the very sparsely settled homesteads. The drought is so bad that all the sheep we see are being fed Lucerne or other forms of bought supplement.



But that's it nothing in terms of herds or goat farming. Those we speak to direct us to the biggest goat farmer in the area, a Mr Freddie Stolper from Upington. We meet him in Upington at his family camera and electronics shop, he squeezes into the bakkie and takes us to look at his goats. 7 foot, full of smiles and very happy to talk and share. He has 400 goats roaming the townlands and some plots he owns near the town on the bank of the Orange River. He also has some Persian sheep that are his real passion and that he is breeding rare colours out of, some cattle and other farmyard animals in the rambling farm yard.



The goats are good money he says but they have to be home when giving birth otherwise they lose kids. His farming system is not really extensive as it costs him R40 000 a month to feed them. He mainly sells castrates to the live meat market but never really has enough to sell. He says to try on the road north...there are a lot of goat farmers there. Mr Stolper is a quasi-representative of the goat industry in the area. He shares perspective of the farmers and says the farmers have land that would be better suited for goats but they keep sheep as it involves less management and people would need resident staff with all its implications. He says sheep can be put on a farm and leave

there and come back and they are all there waiting. Goats are seen as the devil's things. They have no respect for containment or fences. There's a theory in this area if you want goats on your farm you get your neighbour to buy them then you wait as they will poach on your farm.

We head north on the main road to the Kalahari and the Namibian border. This is where all the goats come down we are told. Lots of communal farmers there.



We find the only town on the way- Askham. It was set up in 1931 as a mission a police station and a camel breeding station for the mounted desert police with over 400 camels at one stage. Upington police station has a statue commemorating these trusted camels and the invaluable contribution towards law and order in the early years.



There are just some shops a petrol station and coffee shop now. The white sand red sand border is actually the old river bed which is now the residential area and main goat keeping area. We talked to a local farmer, Mr Draaier. He says the goats are let out into the red dunes every day. Its good money mainly selling castrates but when you get hungry you will sell the others too. The speculators come around every couple of months and buy directly. He shows us his kids in the kraal and the scale he uses as the price is per Kg. There are many small farmers like him down the river bed. Below the town in the dunes.



We decide to look for more farmers towards the Namibian border. A little sceptical now as we have seen very few goats really and 300 goats are what communal herders in Msinga have.



We pass salt pans. Bulldozers move salt and it dries in the shimmering heat. We pass the now famous Hakskeen Pan where the land speed record is being tested by a British team. It already holds a record as the largest area cleared by hand in the world, community members cleared 16 500 tons of rock to make the runway for the test.

We drive through the rudimentary Rietfontein South Africa/Namibian border... and end up at the town of Aroab. Yes, goats are the main source of cash here too but sparsely scattered through the 200mm a year rainfall desert. There is a sales yard and loading ramp but also a painted sign saying all activity at the site needs to be reported at the offices.



Same story as elsewhere- goats are better hardier and more value but they need staff and herders and farmers don't want on farm residents, so they stick to sheep. But the sheep are dying and not coping with the changes. Most areas of the Karoo claim losses of 80 percent of their sheep flocks. If this is the future pattern of farming, then the switch to goats and the realities of employing more staff is inevitable.

It's also clear there are no really large commercial goat farmers in the Karoo. This was also true of Namibia. All the million plus goats, that come into South Africa from Namibia, come from communal farmers scattered around these areas. They work on a speculator model where European speculating companies usually owning trucks, buy goats till they have enough for a truckload and head to KwaZulu-Natal. These farmers need a support system that does not exist in South African extension systems. Also, the many companies selling products to the small livestock industry need to reconfigure their business to these sort of farmers.

There is certainly a strong stud breeding industry in this part of the world, but it relies on small very intensive herds. And has no real chance of large numbers and communal farmers joining it. The administration and paperwork as well as controlled breeding environment is daunting to most extensive farmers.



There are two well-known value chain initiatives in this part of the world that are worth considering as case studies. The first- Karoo Lamb of origin. Foods with a regional and specific character that can only be found in a specific region. Karoo Lamb, as defined, can thus only be farmed in the Karoo – on natural Karoo veld. With no feedlotting and no antibiotics. This then excludes any other meat packers or sellers claiming the name of Karoo Lamb. The South African government is supporting this registration, and this represents a unique for south Africa way of protecting farmers who believe they have a product worth selling at a premium. Internationally this is becoming more common with feta for example recognised to be only made in Greece and is protected designation of origin product. This means no one else in the world is allowed to call their product Feta.



A similar initiative on goats was launched as a parastatal called Kalahari Kid based around the Griekwastad/Kimberly area to sell goat meat and make it a high value sought after product. We planned to visit communal farmers who were part of this initiative we had heard about on the way back.



The Kalahari Kid Corporation is dedicated to producing only superior quality goat and lamb products for both the local and international markets. It is a joint initiative between commercial promoters, the Northern Cape Provincial Government and emerging farmers in the Northern Cape.

We tried for three months to get a meeting with Kalahari Kid or a visit to any of its farmers. The best we could get was an invitation to their corporate offices in Pretoria. We contacted one of their farm managers in Groblershoop and arranged a visit but the moment head office heard of it we were told not to contact him as the people on the farms were illiterate and could not speak on behalf of the company and it was disruptive bringing the goats together and they got stressed from it. It was a weird interaction with a government funded project. We were warned that it is a paper tiger of sorts but disappointing not to be able to see anything or any farmers.

So back to KwaZulu Natal where the goats are plentiful and indeed do roam.

