



HD From pest to profit: Goats helping farmers turn profits even in country's driest areas

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The humble goat, an animal that has long been seen predominantly as a pest, is helping farmers turn a profit even in some of the country's most arid areas.

Katie and Ed Davies run Fairmount Station, south of Wilcannia, a town that straddles the famous Darling River in western New South Wales.

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"The goat is an amazing animal," Ms Davies said.

"We've gone from having a pest animal into a resource now. It is a lean, green source of protein and you can't ask for better than that."

It is the couple's second year on the land after years striving to raise the funds to achieve their goal of buying a rangeland station.

Ed spent a decade working underground in the mines of Broken Hill, a two-hour drive west, and also runs an earthmoving **business** for additional off-farm income.

Katie still spends the weekdays in Broken Hill, employed in the mining industry.

But goats are the main focus of their enterprise.

The couple **buy** them from other outback pastoralists and carefully manage the animals' growth until they reach marketable weight.

Then they are consigned for slaughter and trucked to abattoirs in western Queensland or northern Victoria.

More than two **million** goats flourish in the Australian outback.

Their ancestors were domestic animals that trailed behind the wagons of the pioneers, supplying meat and **milk**. The hardiness of the goat has enabled it to thrive and run rampant in the arid inland.

"They will browse – they're not specific to one species of feed. When that feed has disappeared or dried up ... they're very happy to eat the scraps," Ms Davies said.

"They are the garbage disposal of the plant world. They are happy to eat anything. Whether it be an invasive native species, whether it's beautiful fresh grass that's coming through, they're very happy to eat a wide and diverse type of feed."

Goats great survivors, but grazing management crucial

The goat's omnivorous habits have earned it a reputation for degrading land.

Goat producers like the Davies stress that it is crucial to manage the grazing pressure of goat herds. On the flipside, the goat is the great survivor.

In recent years, Australia's goat industry has re-branded these outback nomads - long considered "feral" - as "rangeland" goats.

Unlike sheep, they do not require shearing, crutching, drenching or a range of other expensive husbandry.

What's more, the wild goat population has endured and survived crippling droughts of recent years that forced some rangeland pastoralists to sell off all their sheep and cattle.

In recent times, goats have been the salvation of many landholders in this marginal country.

Jo Gates, who with her husband Rick runs a large goat trading **business**, makes no bones about the crucial income they have derived from wild goats.

"We wouldn't have been here if we hadn't have made a change. It's just not wool country," she said.

When the wool market collapsed in 1991 there was very little market for the type of fleece grown in the harsh inland.

Wild goats may have been worth a mere few dollars a head back then, but the Gates' property had a ready supply.

Gradually, the returns rose and the margins from every truckload sent off went into constructing goat-proof fencing.

Soon goats displaced the sheep entirely.

The Gates' Burndoo Station, also near Wilcannia, now has hundreds of kilometres of impressive fencing that allows for easy management and stringent control of vast numbers of goats mustered from across the southern outback.

Producers look to Asia's booming demand for meat

Last year Rick and Jo Gates sent off 150,000 animals from their depot. This year the figure could reach 180,000.

The traditional market has been to North America, where goat is an affordable staple for the Latin American population.

"It's the world's most widely accepted meat, because there are no barriers from religions," Mr Gates said.

"And I think that's why we're having the growth rates we're seeing in the goat market."

Three years ago, **China** and India began buying Australian rangeland goats.

What began as a trickle is fast becoming a torrent of trade.

"I think we started with 30 tonnes and then it went tenfold and in the third year we were selling 3,000 tonnes," Mr Gates said.

Mr Gates was recently elected president of the nation's peak industry body, the Goat Council of Australia.

Ms Davies says the booming demand for meat in Asia is an incredible opportunity for the goat industry.

"The size of the population over there and their inefficiencies with land due to overpopulation will allow us to feed the Asian food bowl with this protein source," she said.

"There aren't any animal inputs when it comes to a rangeland animal and the market is going to just take off."

The booming demand for rangeland goats is seeing a dramatic change in land use throughout Australia's arid zones.

"I think between Wilcannia and Ivanhoe now there is one flock of pure Merinos left. Ten or 15 years ago, the whole area was either Merinos with a mix of cattle," Mr Gates said.

There are very few wool producers in the region now. Most are growing hardy meat sheep such as Dorpers or have changed their livestock enterprise to goats.

"It's not just, you know, the stinky old goats," Ms Davies said.

"It is a very viable commodity going forward. That's what our bank has found with us and worked with us to go forward."

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