



HD Pest to Profit

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WC 2,410 words

PD 21 June 2014

SN Australian Broadcasting Corporation Transcripts

SC ABCTRS

LA English

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They've long been derided as a scourge to the environment and a pest to pastoralists but wild goats are now a viable export commodity.

PIP COURTNEY, PRESENTER: But first, a story about how farmers can make money from a feral pest.

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Wild goats have long been derided as a scourge to the environment and a pest to pastoralists. But that view is radically changing. In recent years, the wild goat has been the salvation of some and the future hope of many, as Tim Lee reports.

TIM LEE, REPORTER: In the grey light of dawn, Ross Gates' ultralight sputters to life and roars upwards into the outback sky.

It's muster day at Burndoo Station, south of Wilcannia in far western New South Wales.

The property is vast - 25,000 hectares - so flying is the quickest, most efficient way to spot the quarry. These fleeing forms are goats. Long seen as a scourge, wild goats are now viewed as a vital resource for many landholders in Australia's arid zone.

JOANNE GATES, "BURNDOO" WILCANNIA: I think they're incorporating them into their **business** plan and not just trying to get rid of them as a feral pest.

KATIE DAVIES, "FAIRMONT" WILCANNIA: Look, the goat is an incredible animal. You're right, we've gone from having a pest animal into a resource now.

The perception of the goat has a long way to go, but it is a lean, green source of protein and you can't ask for better than that.

TIM LEE: Domestic goats once accompanied the pioneers into every pocket of the often inhospitable inland; supplying **milk** and meat and thriving, sometimes where other domestic stock could scarcely survive.

Today there are more than 2 **million** feral goats roaming the outback. Some years back, goat producers relabelled them as rangeland goats, a slightly more endearing term than 'feral'.

RICK GATES, "BURNDOO" WILCANNIA: We've seen a gradual increase in the kill figures, like the eastern slaughter numbers, and the industry's growing at a good steady rate.

TIM LEE: There's normally two musters a week at Burndoo and each is followed by a rigorous sorting process.

The most saleable goats, those in the weight range of 23-25 kilograms, are drafted from the breeding stock and animals that need more time to mature.

As well as running their own herds, the Gates family operates two trading depots, one on their home place and another at Ivanhoe, to the south. They **buy** goats from other pastoralists in the lower Darling River region.

RICK GATES: Most times we **buy** everything, from goats too small to be processed right up to the big billies that dress out at 30-odd kilo. So it's critical... like the first step is to draft, to sex the animals, get the billies away from the nannies - they do better away from each other. Then the billies have actually got to be sorted into two sizes too, because they do better if the big ones aren't with the little ones.

TIM LEE: These animals are destined for an abattoir in northern Victoria. It's a long haul, so each batch is carefully weighed to ensure it meets the required average live weight. The **business** also trucks goats to an abattoir in western Queensland and **business** was booming when Landline last visited Burndoo in 2008.

RICK GATES: This year, we're looking at 100,000 from June to June. At this stage we've done 50,000. Last year it was 70,000 and the job just seems to be growing steadily.

GOAT FARMER: Hey, hey, hey! Right up, right up.

TIM LEE: Since then, the growth of Australia's rangeland goat trade has continued at a spectacular rate. For the Gates, numbers have roughly doubled.

RICK GATES: Around the 150,000 animals a year, which is... it's about three to four **B**-doubles a week.

TIM LEE: Till now, North America's large Latino population has been the major destination for goat meat. Three years ago, **China**, seeking a readily affordable meat, entered the fray.

RICK GATES: Like, our traditional market has been into America - it's always been our strongest market and still is. And we need to nurture that, we don't want to drop the ball into those markets that have been strong. But **China**, Korea and India are looking good. **China** is there now and is growing at a rate... I think we started with 30 tonne three years ago, and then it went 10-fold - we went to 300 - and then the third year, we were selling 3,000 tonnes.

TIM LEE: The Gates family is a trailblazer in Australia's goat industry. Burndoo is the main hub in western New South Wales and Rick Gates was recently elected president of the nation's peak industry body, the Goat Council of Australia. Rick and Jo have acted as mentors to other budding goat producers. Among them are their near neighbours Ed and Katie Davies.

(Talking to Katie Davies) These are fairly typical rangeland goats?

KATIE DAVIES, "FAIRMONT" WILCANNIA: Yes, you can see. We've got goats that are very content. They're frolicking together. They've probably had a great morning out. You can see the pick that's on the ground - excellent nutritional content at the moment. And with the rain that we've had just increasing, you know, the bulk of the feed that we've got, increasing their ability to grow, they're nurturing their young - as you can see, they're frolicking, they're happy, they're healthy. That's what we're about - producing an animal that's going to then in turn have the financial reward for us.

TIM LEE: Katie Davies, who serves on the goat committee of New South Wales Farmers, is an energetic voice in helping to develop the goat industry.

KATIE DAVIES: The Asian market has just got the most incredible potential. The size of the population over there and their inefficiencies with land due to their population size will allow us to feed the Asian food bowl with this protein source. It's a lean, green protein source. There isn't any animal inputs when it comes to a rangeland animal, which is what we graze here, Ed and I graze here on Fairmont. And it's going to... the market is just going to take off.

TIM LEE: Ed and Katie Davies achieved their dream of buying their own station two years ago. Ed had spent a decade working in the mines and Katie still works in the mining industry at Broken Hill during the week.

Unlike most livestock, goats require very little handling and husbandry. And unlike sheep, they don't need shearing, crutching or drenching, so they incur few labour costs.

ED DAVIES, "FAIRMONT" WILCANNIA: We have other income. We do earthmoving off farm and then when we're not doing that, we utilise machinery on the property. And that helps us. And with the goats, we know they've been let go and they're doing their own thing, they're right - we don't need to be checking them daily or worry that they're going to get flystrike or need drenching or whatever. That just suits us.

KATIE DAVIES: The animal is very stoic. They're a very hardy animal. They will browse - they're not specific to one species of feed - so when that feed's disappeared or dried up, they're very happy to eat the scraps. 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 grasses coming through. They're very happy to eat a wide and diverse type of feed. They're great.

TIM LEE: Goat producers say it's crucial not to allow overgrazing, or else goats can cause land degradation. To better manage grazing pressure, over time Rick and Joanne Gates have erected on their property hundreds of kilometres of goat-proof fencing.

JOANNE GATES, "BURNDOD" WILCANNIA: We found here that with the right stocking rate, they've actually helped control the woody weed, the hotbush mainly - turpentine, they're not so keen on. And we've noticed, like, padding into the waters where the sheep and cattle pad in, they'll make really big pads. Goats will just wander in at their own leisure. They're real browsers. So we've got, our ground cover, our grass cover is amazing now, like, a lot better. So they'll rather nibble a tree than get on the ground, so some of our paddocks are really improved with their ground cover.

ED DAVIES: Animals get bad names and usually it's not the animal that's got the name - it's the person who's running it. So whether it be sheep, cattle or goats - whatever animal, if there's too many of them, they'll eat it back to nothing.

TIM LEE: Conversely, Rick Gates and others believe goats, as browsers, are not only kinder on the environment in not denuding ground cover, they can even restore degraded grazing country by removing unwanted woody vegetation.

RICK GATES: Eighty per cent of your woody weed problem is solved because they're browsers, they're actually conserving the grass. Like, you're encouraging grass to regenerate and grow. And you've had a drive around here, Tim - you can see it's all looking pretty healthy. We're more than happy.

TIM LEE: Of course, the goat evolved in really arid conditions, so it's supremely adapted to the harshness of Australia's inland. At the moment this region's enjoying a really excellent season. But it's in the dry and really trying times that the hardiness of the goat really shines.

And in recent times, this great survivor proved to be the salvation of many landholders in this marginal country. Jo Gates makes no bones about it.

JOANNE GATES: We wouldn't have been here, yes, if we hadn't have made a change. It just is not wool country.

TIM LEE: When the wool price slumped in 1991, there was little market for the type of fleece grown in the harsh inland. Wild goats may have been worth a mere few dollars a head, but the Gates' property had a ready supply. The returns from every truckload sent off went into constructing goat-proof fencing, until soon goats displaced the sheep entirely.

JOANNE GATES: We slowly changed over to goats, paddock by paddock, and our main aim was to just be able to give the kids an education. Well, we did that and now we've expanded and now Ross is back home again and, you know, we'll be able to get a bit more land. Yes, it's been, you know... it's been really good.

TIM LEE: Their son Ross is back home on the farm now and keen to expand the **business**. Market-size goats now bring returns of between \$20 to \$25 a head. One of the greatest continual challenges is ensuring a year-round supply of marketable animals.

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

RICK GATES: Big move from merinos. I think between Wilcannia and Ivanhoe now, there is one flock of pure merinos left. And 10, 15 years ago, the whole area was merino - either merinos or merinos with a mix of cattle.

TIM LEE: There are very few wool producers out here now. Most are growing hardy meat sheep such as Dorpers or have begun to harvest goats.

JOANNE GATES: They realise now that the demand is outweighing the supply. We thought that the resource would start to run out after a while but it just seems to be getting more and more and people are just realising their worth and that they can make a good bit of money out of them nowadays.

TIM LEE: During the recent decade-long drought that gripped this region, for many, goats helped stave off financial ruin.

KATIE DAVIES: Without a doubt. I doubt there would be many children in the western division of properties that would've been educated without the help of the opportunistic goat harvest. You know, there's a lot of people that have stayed on their property because of the opportunistic goat harvest.

ED DAVIES: That's what put children through a lot of boarding schools. We've come from a big wool-growing family and wool was pretty tough. So the goats, as much as a lot of people probably don't want to admit it, that's what's kept them going.

TIM LEE: Andy and Fiona McLeod are happy to sing the praises of goats. The couple own Coombah Station, south of Broken Hill. The enterprise is a mix of large-scale cropping, merino sheep, Dorper sheep and beef cattle, but they say rangeland goats are their most vital product. They annually turn off about 15,000.

ANDY MCLEOD, "COOMBAH" BROKEN HILL: I reckon there'd be people that wouldn't be around still if it wasn't for goats. We'd probably be one of them as well.

KATIE DAVIES: It's not just the stinky old goats. It is a very viable commodity going forward and that's what our bank has found with us and worked with us to do that, that we can go forward. There's going to be a huge, huge, burgeoning Asian market that requires protein and goat is such an easy protein to produce.

TIM LEE: Katie Davies is extremely grateful for the trail blazed by the Gates family.

KATIE DAVIES: We couldn't do what we do today without the mentorship, the friendship and the leadership from Jo and Rick. They're amazing people. What they've done with their property in turning it around from a merino operation into the goat depot that they have today is incredible and it gives us such an insight into the industry.

RICK GATES: It's been a good move away from the tradition that grandfather and father did for I don't know how long - since the early 1900s. We just realised that we had to break from tradition and we're more than happy.

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IPD pest

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AN Document ABCTRS0020140622ea6l0002t