

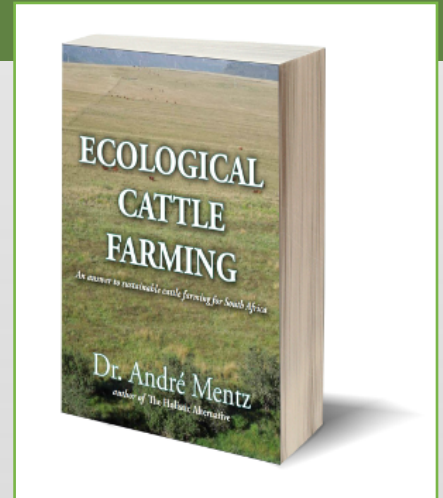
The Quest for Ecological Cattle Farming

CLICK HERE to buy the book from our website

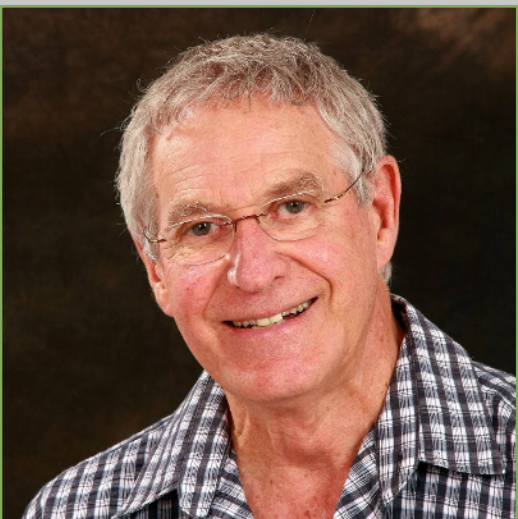
THE ESSENCE OF CATTLE FARMING

A short discussion

Although a substantial extent of cattle farming is established in the central mixed farming regions of South Africa, where various artificial methods are supporting cattle production, the predominantly destination is situated in the extensive regions on natural veld. To me the truth of cattle farming lies within the integrity of how herbivores' are managed and not in a zoo image focussing only on the animal itself.



Cattle farming is not about cattle from beginning to end. Rather we should think of cattle farming, in the South African context, in terms of the millions hectare covered with natural grazing divided into ten thousands of cattle farms and stocked with more or less with 13 million cattle. Think about the variance in vegetation, topography, rainfall and temperatures from region to region. Think about drought periods, veld fires, bush encroachment and plagues like locusts and commando worms. Keep in mind the price of land, the cost of infrastructure and homestead and the labour to conserve everything. All of this is priorities before attending to the stock and a production system.



Dr. André Mentz is the author of the book Ecological Cattle Farming. He worked for the Department of Agriculture for 21 years as an extension officer while conducting research into cattle production at research stations. For 15 years he ran his own cattle farming enterprise in Namibia and was awarded the Master Cattle Farmer of Namibia in 1993. He continued farming cattle in South Africa before retiring to focus on writing books that promote sustainable, ecological cattle farming .

The main features describing cattle farming

1

Orientation

Sustainability in cattle farming is non-negotiable. This includes all facets of the ecology, biology and economy of a cattle farming enterprise. Because cattle are herbivores, created to live and produce extensively, it fits perfect in a sustainable managerial system. The ideal is to prevent any artificial practices in terms of supporting production, and concentrate on adaptable cattle types and improve biodiversity of the veld. The prime principle is to realise that cattle production is part of a chain of manageable processes commencing with sustainable veld utilisation and ultimately offers a natural cattle-product for sale (Figure 1). This diagram might appear very theoretical, although it put the accent on the realities of cattle operations. This is one way to display perspectives of 'what' cattle farming is about.

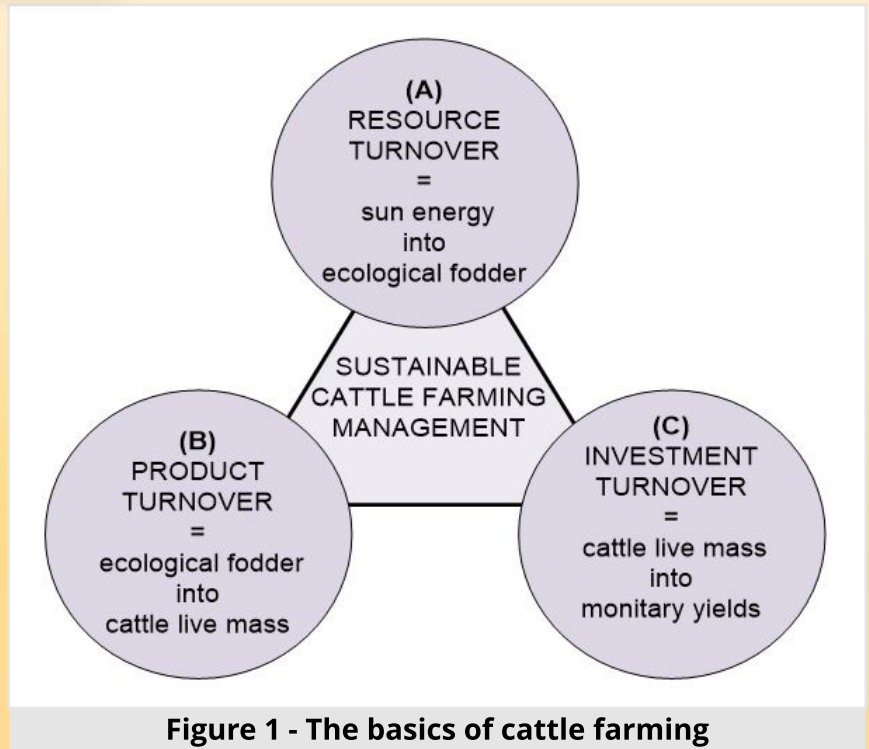


Figure 1 - The basics of cattle farming

2

Purpose

It is apparent from above that we need a holistic attitude towards cattle farming which is far away from perceptions that focus too much on the animal and ignoring the core values of cattle farming. Selection and culling of course always need to be done and nothing prohibits cattle farmers to play around with what they consider important as long as it contributes to the goal. There can only be one goal and to reach that goal depends on your perspectives of which factors will assist you to arrive at the goal.

Figure 2 illustrates the most relevant aspects in economical cattle production management to attend to in a way that guarantees profits. Without profits there can't be cattle farming. This gives another perspective of what cattle farming is about.

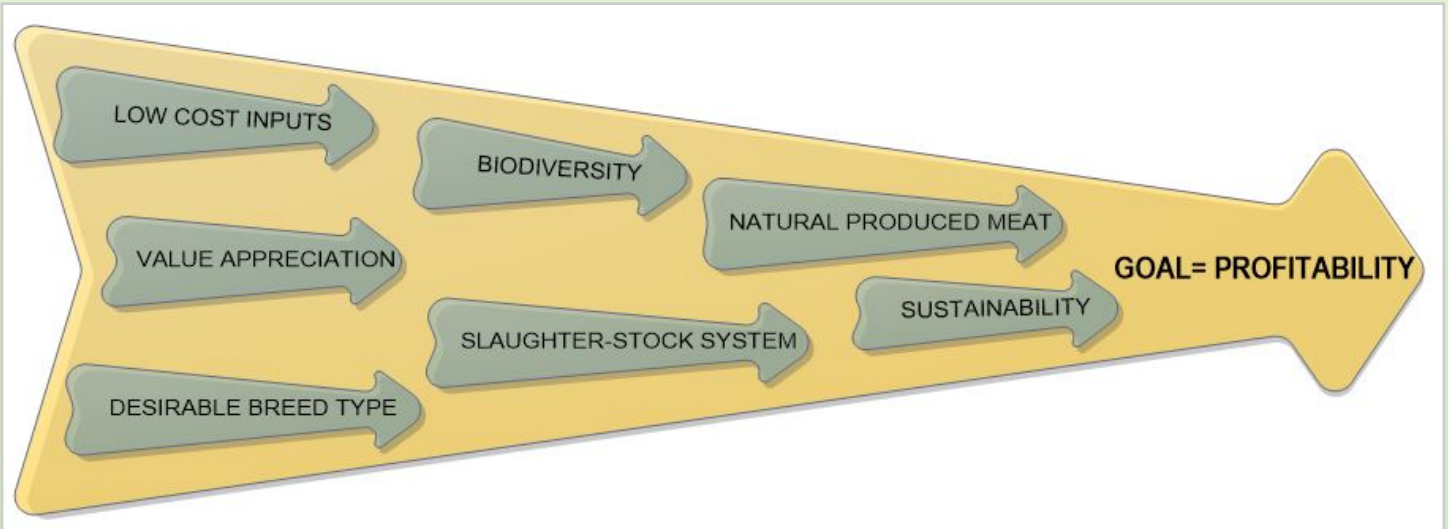


Figure 2 - Factors that will enhance cattle farming profitability

3

Production

Production is the main biological function of livestock on farms, but tragically after a century of activities, it is very much misunderstood. Production is measured in terms of the herd as a whole and is a function of management. The production factor is live mass and measured in terms of kilograms. Four life functions give rise to production in a herd of beef cattle. They are growth, reproduction, lactation and fattening. All cattle consume more or less the same amount of veld fodder per 100 kg of live mass. A production system requires a three year rotational process, sound stocking rates of kilogram live mass per hectare and a stable composition of the herd's classes year after year. The following table visualise the production scenario of a herd of cattle which demonstrates another perspective of what we are dealing with when discussing cattle farming.

Class of herd and details	Num-ber	Ratio	Mass kg	Expected live mass production of the various classes	
				Kg/day	Kg/year
Breeding herd (remains constant)	150	30%	150 cows calve at 80% / year= 120 progeny		
Weaners; mass at 12 months	120	24%	240	0.66/unit	120x0.66x365=28 908
Young stock; mass at 24 months	120	24%	370	0.35/unit	120x0.35x365=15 330
Store stock; mass at 30 months	120	24%	435	0.35/unit	120x0.35x182= 7 600
Total herd	510	-	-	-	51 838

Therefore, a standard herd of 510 cattle, containing 150 cows delivers 360 producing cattle in a sustainable three year rotation which produce 51 838kg per annum

Table 1 - Composition, expected live mass production and gross income per annum of a 510 size of cattle herd in a rotational slaughter system

Interpretation of Table 1:

- *The figure of 51 838kg in Table 1 is expected to equal the off load of the 120 slaughter cattle (culled females and oxen) on an average of 30 months and weighing 432 kg/unit ($120 \times 432 = 51\,838$).*
- *If being sold for R25 per kilogram live mass on average, the yield is R1 295 950 ($51\,838 \times R25$) per annum.*
- *Another feature of the system is that calves born equals the cattle slaughtered per annum.*

Table 1 gives account for managing an extensive cattle production system. All it says is that when you carry a 510 cattle enterprise, you only need 150 cows (30% of herd numbers) and if they reproduce at 80%, it delivers 120 progeny per year. Each year's progeny is ageing to become mature for slaughtering at 30 months on average after selecting heifer replacements and culling the same number from the breeding herd. So eventually the breeding herd remains constant year after year, as well as the store stock becoming slaughter stock which has to fatten in a natural way on veld for slaughtering in the three year rotational system. Due to age, their carcass grading will mainly be in the AB-, B- and C-classes. Marketing takes place directly to any available abattoir.

Conclusion

I have asked myself many times what happened to common sense in cattle farming trying to minimise costs and delivers what the consumer is seeking for. Is it because of a lack of a realistic orientation about the realities of commercial cattle farming and an inadequate purpose thereof? To say you are a cattle farmer, what does it mean? Or to say you are farming with cattle and sell cattle, does that make you a cattle farmer? Do you deliver the preferred natural red meat end product of cattle farming by marketing slaughter cattle? Are you the mentor for each calve born on your farm to appreciate in value until it reaches its goal to be slaughtered or becoming a breeder? Or are you feeding speculators and feeders in the production chain to reap the financial opportunities you offer them on a tray? Are you running after every new breed or highest performing bull in your efforts to wean heavy calves because you do not understand the realities of the production cycle in a cattle herd? Do you respect the values of honest sustainability versus the implications of supporting the artificial censurable process of industrialisation? I can only hope that these few remarks will motivate you to think and to judge your perspectives on managing a successful cattle farming enterprise.

CLICK HERE to buy the book from our website