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1969/70

First deer farm in NZ (Drew, 2009)

Story: Deer and deer farming
Page 3 – The beginnings of deer farming

The first farms

The first licence to farm deer was issued to M. P. Giles of Rahana station, near Taupō, in 1969. By 1979 there were 800 deer farms, and the interest was so great that there were 1,540 a year later. At that time there were 120,000 deer being farmed. Most were red deer (85%), 14% were fallow and the rest included wapiti, sika, rusa and white-tailed species.

The New Zealand Deer Farmers Association was formed in 1975 with 25 founding members. Peter Elworthy was the first president, and held the office for six years. The first deer auction was held on Tim Wallis's property in 1977. Prices for the 383 animals sold ranged from \$750 for mature stags to \$250 for weaner stags. month-old weaner hinds fetched \$550.

However, there were battles with government bureaucracy. The Forest Service required that deer farms had to be set up within the range of feral deer – so, theoretically, a deer farm could not be established on farmland. Applying to farm deer was a complex process involving three government agencies – the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Forest Service and the Ministry of Works.

Domestication

The domestication of deer in New Zealand has been a remarkable achievement. Some suggest that it has been the first animal for 5,000 years to be fully domesticated. This has been achieved through a unique mix of factors:

- innovative people who developed systems for deer capture and management
- no public opposition to the shooting or capture of deer, because the animal was labelled 'noxious' by the government and extermination was the official policy
- a large wild population of deer, providing a ready source of stock
- a temperate climate allowing year-round grazing of pasture, with some additional feed in winter, which was a management system that deer could adapt to.

An early boost

Early deer farmers had to deal with a good deal of bureaucratic red tape to get established. But the industry got an early boost when Ministry of Agriculture scientist Ken Drew set up a deer research unit at Invermay Agricultural Research Station in 1973. Drew and his team developed methods for handling the flighty animals, and he was an early advocate for crossing red deer with wapiti.

Deer farming worldwide

Numbers of farmed deer worldwide are difficult to obtain. In 1989, estimates were 1.2 million in China, USSR 250,000, Korea 110,000, Australia 40,000, UK 15,000 and North America 6,000 – a total of 1.62 million outside New Zealand. At that time New Zealand had 1.1 million hinds and 500,000 stags – about 50% of the world's estimated farmed deer. There were also about 2.77 million farmed reindeer, mainly in the USSR.

In 2005 more than 1.7 million deer were being farmed in New Zealand – compared with 5 million dairy cows, almost 40 million sheep and 4.4 million beef cattle. Modern deer farming in New Zealand leads the world – both in its technology and its relative contribution to the national economy.



Red deer stags



Red deer hinds and fawns



Père David deer



Wapiti (North American elk)



Fallow deer stags

Deer herd improvement

Once deer farming was established, farmers began breeding the animals for better quality. Red deer were selected for meat production, and for their superior antlers, used to produce antler velvet. In recent times some imported European strains, bigger than red deer, have produced productive crossbred offspring.

Père David experiment

The breeding season for red deer is governed by day length – but Père David deer can breed eight weeks earlier in spring. They were introduced in 1984, with the hope that hybridisation would allow earlier breeding and improve carcass size and shape. But pure Père David deer were susceptible to malignant catarrhal fever – so the experiment was unsuccessful.

Crossbreeding with wapiti

Some farmers crossbred red deer with wapiti (North American elk). The progeny grow faster than red deer and have bigger antlers. Wapiti were captured in Fiordland and put on deer farms throughout the country. Their numbers were boosted by imports from Canada, although health issues have now closed that source of animals. Farmers of red deer often buy in a wapiti–red crossbred bull, which they breed with red deer hinds, selling the progeny for venison.

Fallow deer

Fallow deer appeared an attractive species to farm for meat, as they are smaller than red deer and can be farmed at a higher stocking rate. However, in recent times their popularity has fallen, partly because they do not produce commercial antler velvet and partly because their small size means slaughter costs are high for the amount of meat produced.

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