

## Goats not to blame for desertification? Oh yes they are!

Monday, December 04, 2006

### Part 1

Last night I attended the launch of the Linnean Tercentenary <http://www.linnean.org/> - along with many of the great and good of the natural history and biological world, and it was heartening to hear the support of several eminent naturalists, and in particular those with Africa and desert experience, for my stance against more goats. It was particularly good to see John Cloudsley-Thompson, now in his mid-80s, doyen of desert biologists - see: Ecology of Desert Environments : A Festschrift for Prof. J.L. Cloudsley Thompson on his 80 Birthday/edited by Ishwar Prakash. Jodhpur, Scientific, 2001, xiii, 471 p., ISBN 81-7233-288-2. This along with many other of John's publications is excellent background to the environmental crisis of arid areas.

I was also gratified to see yesterday that we had made it to the pages of Private Eye. Having been a reader of Private Eye since its very first issue, I was not in the least surprised to see their ignorance of the literature concerning desertification - why spoil a good story with accuracy? It's par the for course. What I find interesting, is that the emails and phone calls to the WLT show overwhelming support for our stance. The only critics seem to be those employed by the aid agencies, or those with a vested interest.

Farm Africa have reacted, almost hysterically, to my criticisms of the "goats for Africa" campaigns. However, it appears they, like many of the other charities, have not really understood the nature of my criticism. I have not said that every single goat project funded by every single aid charity is wrong. One of the problems of relying on press reports.

I am sure that some of the charities have done proper Environmental Impact Assessments of their projects (however, I cannot find details of any of these on the internet, and none have been volunteered to me so far). However, reactions from Farm Africa, are bound to be in this vein, since their whole ethos seems to be based around promoting European-style attitudes to livestock farming and production. While this is primarily an ethical issue, there are of course environmental implications as well. But I personally can't help feeling that it's wrong to be exporting these approaches to livestock farming, at a time when there is increasing rejection in the developed world. It smacks of bio-colonialism - Farm Africa even state that the government (of Kenya) is encouraging de-stocking in areas where they are trying to increase stocks. But, as I say, it's a different argument - and perhaps I have misunderstood it all.

My principal criticism, is that the aid charities are marketing goats to the world as a way out of poverty in Africa, without making it very clear, that goats and over-grazing are also one of the major causes of poverty over much of subSaharan Africa. Nor do any of the charities promoting goats explain what happens when the next drought comes along. None of the defenses for promoting goats, put forward by the aid charities, have convinced me that Africa needs more goats. The number of hooved animals in subSaharan Africa went from around 275 million in 1961 to over 655 million by 2005 (FAO Statistics) -- and the levels of poverty have not decreased - they have escalated.

The map on the UN website showing desertification [www.fao.org/desertification/default.asp?lang=en](http://www.fao.org/desertification/default.asp?lang=en) shows the problem.

It is interesting/significant that the aid charities involved with promoting goats for Africa, only ever put forward CEOs, fundraisers, agronomists and the like to argue their case - I have yet to hear any conservationists or environmentalists who believe that hundreds of thousands more goats in Africa is a way out of poverty. I would certainly be interested in hearing from any.

Any school kid in Africa surfing the net on his class computer, because of all this high-profile marketing will be bombarded with information about

an the high profile marketing, will be combined with information about goats, how easy it is to grow a herd, how they will produce gallons of milk, tonnes of manure, and loads of kids, and how they will solve the problems of rural communities. Do we really want them to believe this?

## Goats saga part 2

This is a link to the Farm Africa Press release

<http://www.farmafrica.org.uk/newspdfs/108.pdf>

And just to put the record straight I have made a few comments below on their claims, in case Private Eye or any other journalists want to follow it through.

Where rainfall is too low to grow crops, it means that the habitat is extremely fragile and liable to desertification when overgrazed, and 65 million hectares of sub-Saharan Africa have been lost to desertification (in the past 50 years), with overgrazing one of the main causes. Increasing the goat population (as well as camels, cattle and sheep) is a disaster; q.e.d.

Farm Africa claim a "backgarden" is .5-2ha. Where? Even 0.5ha is a very big garden, by British standards. In England very few gardens are between 1 and 5 acres, which is the size claimed (1ha = 2.47 acres). Hopefully their other claims are a bit more realistic.

Most goats are kept by pastoralists, who consequently do not usually have that many crop residues. Livestock also requires large amounts of water, particularly if they are producing milk. This is normally a scarce commodity in arid environments.

Camels are particularly destructive, since they can feed on vegetation and live in areas where almost no other grazing animals can survive, and are often kept as symbols of wealth, rather than any utilitarian purpose.

By their own admission goats **will** cause environmental destruction. The WLT has never claimed that the goats created the arid degraded environments. What I have said is that when introduced into fragile, degraded environments, goats will eat almost anything left that is eatable, and will thus often be the main cause of desertification, which in turn is a major cause of poverty.

It is claimed by Farm Africa that the WLT's views on the destructive nature of goats were exposed as nonsense, but we can find no trace of this exposure. The reverse is true: various UN sponsored websites (FAO, UNEP for example) give extensive data showing the connection between goats and desertification). Furthermore the emails responding to my criticisms earlier in the year were almost unanimous in their support (particularly from those with first hand experience).

Encouraging further expansion of the already vast goat population, to me, shows 'breathtaking' contempt for past knowledge and experiences about the causes of desertification.

I challenge all the charities involved to publish on their websites details of any of the Environmental Impact Assessments of their projects carried out in arid environments, in advance of commencing the projects, so that the environmental community can comment on them. Also a list of where all these projects are implemented, numbers of goats involved etc. One of the problems confronting anyone wanting to research this issue is the lack of transparency in many of the implementing agencies.

Finally I would like to re-iterate my criticism: It is that aid agencies are promoting goats as a solution to poverty in Africa, without making it clear that goats are also recognised as one of the significant causal factors contributing to poverty. I am sure that individual projects do not cause

enviromental damage. But I am also sure that anything that encourages the overall growth of the goat population in sub-Saharan Africa, will do more harm than good.

But realistically, no one is going to address the real problem: that the human population far exceeds the carrying capacity of the land. And the human population continues to grow, at an unsustainable rate. And of course this is true not only of sub-Saharan Africa, but many other parts of the world. Search as hard as I can, and on all the websites of all the aid charities, it is nigh on impossible to find projects that address this issue, or even allow people to address it themselves.

The dramatic increase in activity on our website demonstrates there is considerable public interest in these topics. So please do let us have feedback.

Labels: [International Aid](#)

**Posted by John Monday, December 04, 2006**

## The Goat season approaches

Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Despite my criticisms, and the general failure of aid agencies to address the issues adequately, it seems more and more charities are jumping on the 'goats for Africa' bandwagon.

But before buying a goat for Christmas have a look at

<http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/deserts/desertification/>

And not only goats. All manner of livestock. Including camels. And this is despite the fact that livestock, particularly cattle and camels are often simply status symbols. And as the website quoted above shows, in areas prone to drought, when a drought comes along, there is wholesale death and destruction of livestock. I am not saying that in some cases livestock are not a good thing in Africa, but in many many cases, goats and other livestock are a cause of poverty, not a solution. It is irresponsible for aid agencies to continue to promote them as a solution. Any schoolkid logging on to the internet in Kenya or other parts of Africa will get a very wrong message.

Oxfam claims to have provided 700,000 goats to Africa in the past three years, according to an interview in the Guardian of 18 October. I don't know how many that has now grown to, but using the fact that (according to Oxfam's publicity) the goats are meant to breed, that means there's now an extra million or two goats running around eating everything they can. The Oxfam Unwrapped Team claim, to counter claims that the animals were being bred for slaughter, on their website state that the goats are "not slaughtered for meat" but only used for their milk. But what happens to all the little billy goat kids? Around 50% of the goats will not produce milk.

Other aid charities claim that they are using 'improved' European breeds of cattle and other livestock -- but don't specify how these 'improved' breeds benefit a society which generally measures wealth by numbers, not quality of livestock. In fact all the aid agencies fail to address this fundamental issue -- in most parts of Africa, livestock = wealth. So *giving* the poorest members of society goats can also severely disrupt the social structures. Like so much of foreign aid it is another form of aid imperialism. Telling people we know what's best for them, and making them aid dependent. Aid has been pouring into Africa for 30 or 40 years or more, and the situation in most places is significantly worse than at the time the colonial era ended in the 1960s. Is there a connection? I certainly think so. I am not against aid *per se*, but the way it is disbursed is often demonstrably wrong, ineffective and disempowering. I would also argue that it is often financially inefficient -- though this is difficult to ascertain, as it is difficult, if not impossible to disentangle from the accounts of the organisations involved.

And a new book, *The White Man's Burden*, by William Easterly, a Fellow at the Center for Global Development, argues this case very cogently, according to the reviews I have read -- though I have not yet been able to get a copy.

To reiterate the figures: Sub Saharan Africa has seen its goat population go from a mere 77,600,000 in 1961 to 211,000,000 by 2005. And Oxfam are helping it grow even faster as a quote from their website shows:

*"Oxfam gave me three goats - I did not have any goats at all before. My goats later started to multiply and after two years I gave three goats to my neighbour...At some point I sold 5 goats ... I am now left with 5 goats, of which 2 are also already pregnant." Wilma Mura, a widow in Karika, Sudan*

Andrew Tyler of [Animal Aid](#), has published some very cogent arguments against the use of animals in subSaharan Africa, from the welfare point of view and also pointed out that a newly lactating cow needs about 90 litres

...and also pointed out that a hungry lactating cow needs about 60 litres of water a day..... Visit his website for more arguments against sending animals to Africa this Christmas.

Labels: [International Aid](#)

**Posted by John Tuesday, October 31, 2006**

## The Goat and Cow season is upon us

Friday, November 16, 2007

My attacks on the misguided philanthropy that involves 'sending' cows, goats and other domestic animals to Africa, has had an impact. One very positive outcome has been that Oxfam entered a dialogue with the World Land Trust, and recently assured me that they were starting to undertake Environmental Impact Assessments for their projects. This is clearly a good thing, as it appears that Christian Aid, Send a Cow and many of the others are still not carrying out EIAs. All they seem to do is produce statements from the recipients saying how grateful they are. Well they would, wouldn't they?

My criticisms were very fundamental: overgrazing by domestic animals is one of the most significant causes of habitat degradation in Africa, and hence one of the **causes** of poverty. The numbers (published by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation -- FAO) speak for themselves. And the published literature on the subject is vast. In the past, whole cultures have disappeared as a result of desertification, in which goats are known to have played a significant role.

But beyond this basic flaw in the arguments for promoting programmes that increase the numbers of livestock in Africa, there are other issues which never seem to be openly addressed. In many parts of Africa, animals are a form of wealth and are often accumulated in numbers way above that needed for sustenance; indeed, animals such as camels, are often status symbols. Whenever there is a drought, (and as everyone knows, these are far from infrequent), hundreds of thousands of goats, sheep, cattle and other livestock, die. Each time there is a drought the numbers dieing increases, simply because more and more animals are being kept, with less and less pasture for them. From a wildlife perspective this is even more disastrous, because the domestic livestock are usually in direct competition with the wild antelope and other grazing animals. But whereas the wild animals are often adapted to cycles of drought, and each species has its own niche, the domestic animals simply turn the landscape to desert.

Of course the philanthropic organisations encouraging poor Africans to keep even more livestock are able to demonstrate that a few of the animals they distribute do no harm, but it is the fundamental principle that I am attacking: more livestock is not a solution to poverty in Africa. It is also a form of Aid Imperialism, often making the recipients dependent on imported veterinary supplies, and potentially creating welfare problems, as many of the animals will be kept in conditions that would not be tolerated by those donating the funds.

But perhaps the most bizarre response came from the International Director of Christian Aid, who seemed to imply that I should not criticise them because we were both charities, and it harmed all charities if I criticised them. The reality, of course was very different; last year we received overwhelming support for our stance against increasing livestock in Africa, with virtually no criticism at all. In fact it is almost impossible to find a conservation scientist who does not believe that the overpopulation of both humans and their domestic stock, is the single most serious cause of poverty in Africa.

Until aid agencies tackle these problems head on, there is little hope for either poverty-stricken humans or wildlife.