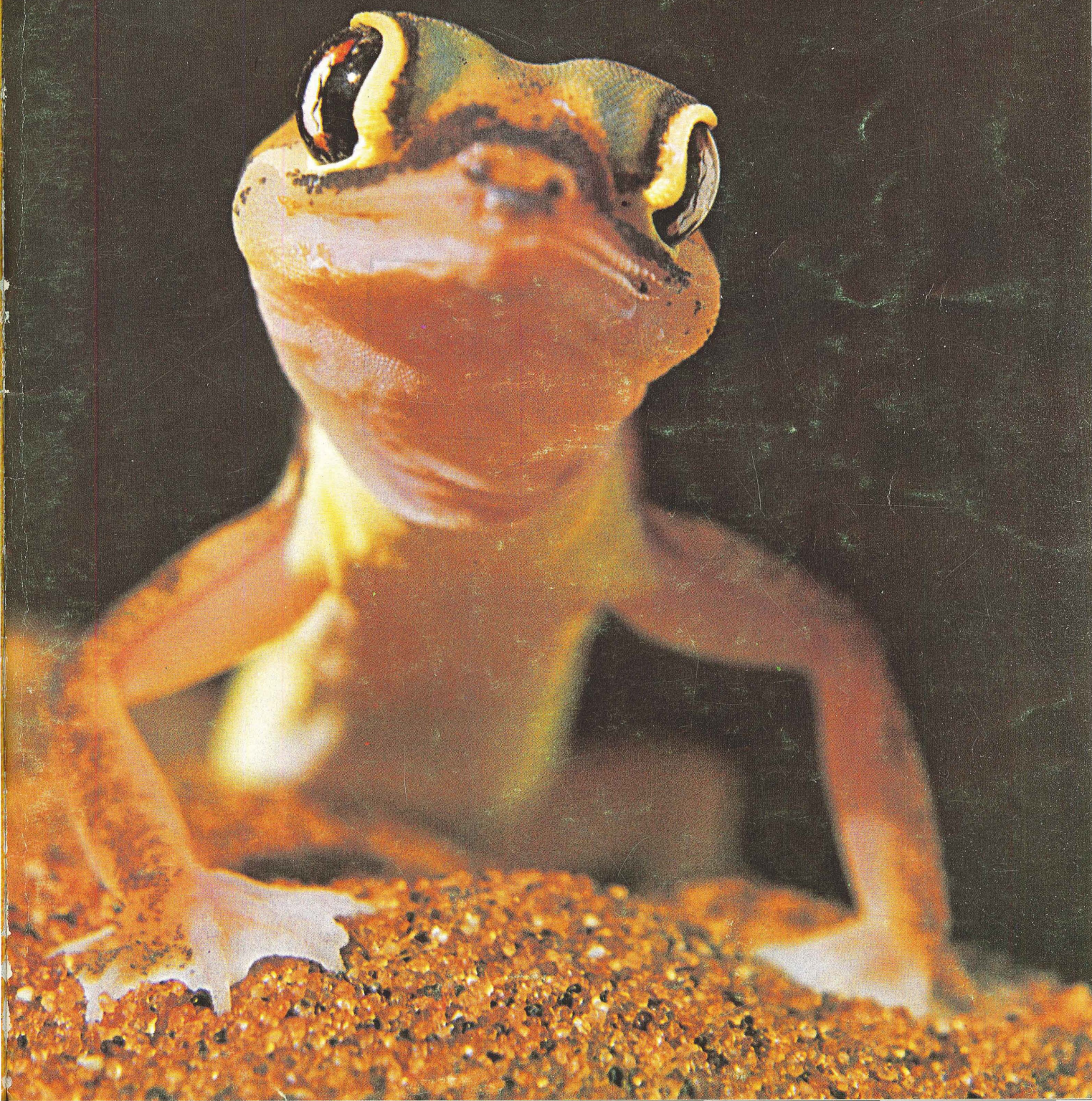


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18 years ago the first game ranch was started in Rhodesia. A new report evaluates the success of game ranching since then, and looks at

A VERY STRANGE COMMODITY

by
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When they scrambled up the granite kopjes they could see the extent of the bushveld below them, an endless horizon of trees and grass. Sweltering in the heat of a Rhodesian summer, brushing mopane flies off their faces, Ray Dasmann and Archie Mossman wondered whether they were trying the impossible.

"We were expected to find something new about game," they said later, "but for a while it seemed all we could do to keep from getting lost."

Because it was the wet season the animals had scattered away from water and were invisible in leaf and light and shadow. And even when the leaves dropped from the trees in winter the animals were camouflaged by tangles of stem and twig. "Consequently it is never easy to see the animals," said the two biologists in their first report. Which was quite a problem considering that seeing the animals was their job at the time.

Dasmann and Mossman had been sent to Africa to prove, within 12 months, that game ranching was more than just a theory, that it was an economic form of land-use. They had a wilderness of more than 54 000 ha in which to work, but even as they were carrying out studies on the wild animals on this land, plans for developing the area for cattle were going inexorably forward.

Eighteen years have passed since that pioneering game ranching experiment started on Doddieburn Ranch, Rhodesia, and the early results of Dasmann and Mossman persuaded the owners of the ranch, Ian and Alan Henderson, that they should leave the wild animals on 31 000 ha of land which had been earmarked for cattle.

Although the first 18 months realised a net profit of only R36 in 1961-62 the profit was up to R3 932 and the year after that it was more than R5 000. There have been ups and downs since then, but 18 years after it started Africa's first commercial game ranch is still going strong.

However, it is likely that the Henderson Brothers would have stopped that first year if they had known then what they know now. Venison is a very strange commodity. Unlike anything else on the market, it is inflation-proof. For 14 years its price in Rhodesia remained unchanged at 26c a kg. Great for the consumer — tough on the man who tried to market the meat.

The unchanging price of venison tells part of the story of the fear, secrecy, prejudice and plain muddle that has hampered game ranching from its beginning. Yet despite it all, game ranching today is proving profitable. Faced with the same penalties and problems conventional cattle ranching "would find it difficult to do so", say Archie and Sue Lee Mossman in a

review of game ranching just published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.*

The report has arrived at a time when the subject of game ranching in South Africa is once again surrounded by rumours of pending laws to restrict this form of land-use. Two years ago the Department of Agriculture set up a committee to look at game production in the Transvaal, and although a report and recommendations have been completed, they remain confidential. New laws have been hinted at, but are not yet in sight.

Has game ranching run into a dead end? In 1974-75 Dr Mossman revisited southern African with his zoologist wife, Professor Sue Lee Mossman, and they spent nine months assessing the developments of the first 14 years.

"The difficulties that the Mossmans' encountered in their attempts to evaluate progress reflect the apathy and confusion of those departments charged with wildlife management," Dr Dasmann, now Chief Ecologist at IUCN, commented recently in the *IUCN BULLETIN*.

Reading between the lines of the Mossmans' report it is apparent that they did not get a wide open, welcoming door wherever they made enquiries. And although they visited game ranches which with varying success were selling biltong, venison, sausages or safaris, they were unable to pin down what should, by now, be basic information:

- How many game ranches are operating in southern Africa
- The area of these ranches
- Their total wildlife populations
- The quantity and value of the game cropped and marketed.

In fact the Mossmans soon realised that to get this information they would have to undertake a door-to-door survey which they did not have time to do. The Transvaal Department of Nature Conservation, which had tackled an intensive survey of Transvaal game ranches, was "unwilling to release any data from this survey to us prior to publication," say the Mossmans. (The Transvaal survey has yet to be published).

It is therefore difficult to know how many men are in the game ranching business today. The Mossmans put forward the figures they could find. In 1964 there were 2 000 to 3 000 Transvaal farms which used one or more species of game as a source of income. In Natal there were 28 designated commercial game ranches. In Rhodesia 179 farmers received cropping permits in 1973 — although only 17 of these operated game ranching operations of any size.

While there are laws galore to control



It pays to ranch impala in South Africa — in Rhodesia the return is so small game ranchers do not bother to take up their quota.

the game rancher, official records are unable to provide much information on the extent of game production today and in their search for statistics the Mossmans eventually resorted to quoting "a South African businessman involved in commercial game cropping" whose statistics showed that "game farms and ranches comprised about 2 580 000 ha in the Transvaal, and about 60 000 ha in Natal. He further estimates that about 10 000 game carcasses were sold locally in South Africa in 1974 and that another 1 900 were exported."

Pity the poor game rancher. No government department in South Africa is quite sure how to handle him. No department is quite sure it *wants* to handle him. The personal interest of individual government offices has done a lot for the development of game ranching in some areas but overall "there is almost no technical, legal or financial assistance for game ranching," says the report, "while domestic livestock production receives substantial assistance." Meanwhile very little contact generally occurs between game producers and the conservation departments.

So the game rancher must stand on his own feet, using his own initiative and his own capital — seeking advice from fellow game ranchers, when he can find them.

The Mossmans found five large game ranching concerns willing to offer their accounts for scrutiny, including the original game ranch, Doddieburn, whose 14 year-old breakdown of income and expenditure will be of interest to many. Overall these enterprises have shown remarkable success, indicating what might be possible with proper support. But even the big-time game ranchers are not full-time game ranchers. All do cattle as well.

Who are the game ranchers? They are men who "have settled where they have because of their fondness for wildlife, for hunting under for the bush," says the report. "Often the rancher does not need to make

Left: Culling surplus elephant and buffalo has enabled Kruger National Park to make a profit on its sales of venison — even though its expensive meat processing factory is sometimes operated much below capacity, or is not running at all. (Wolff © Wildlife Society).

FOOTNOTE

* One Rhodesian rancher, Peter Seymour-Smith, of Iwaba Ranch, near Que Que, has decided to dispose of his cattle and concentrate on multiple wild species utilisation. A report on his ranch by Mr R. H. (Bob) Vaughan-Evans of CONEX (Rhodesia's Department of Conservation and Extension) led him to make this decision. Rhodesia's recent wildlife legislation appears to be working very satisfactorily, with the result that CONEX is able and willing to provide assistance to game ranchers. — Archie and Sue Lee Mossman.



Probably the smallest game ranch would be about eight hectares, suggests the report, with a main crop of cane rats! Practically all birds and mammals, some reptiles, almost all fish and certain insects and some wild plants are consumed by someone.

money from his game but does so to justify keeping the animals. While these factors have led to game ranching practices that do not approach the intensity of management applied to cattle, and hence to a seeming inferiority of game as opposed to cattle as money-spinners, they have also allowed these ranchers to resist and defuse the opposition to game ranching."

The big question has always been — can game ranching prove itself as an economic proposition? "Success is coming slowly," says the Mossman report. Which is not surprising, considering the handicaps.

In Rhodesia, way back in the optimistic early year of 1964, Rhodesian game ranchers produced 806 038 kg of venison. The next year production had leapt to 1 436 410 kg. But the price did not leap too and the remarkable static price of venison in the years that followed, had its effect. The discouragement shows in a steady drop in the quantity of venison marketed — 1965 was to be the peak year, and by 1973 production was almost the same as ten years earlier — 875 475 kg. The Rhodesian game rancher had no incentive to sell his meat, and the Mossmans' report shows that in fact he has hardly bothered to crop his animals at all.

In Rhodesia cropping quotas are set by the Rhodesian Department of National Parks — and at present Rhodesia's game ranchers are taking up only a small percentage of the available quota. In fact the Mossmans' report suggests that Rhodesia's 17 main game ranches forfeited between R318 000 and R909 000 from impala alone by under-cropping.

"Few cattle enterprises could afford to forego such amounts of money through failure to sell surplus animals," comments the report.

In South Africa, once a game rancher has satisfied veterinary and fencing

requirements, he decides for himself how many animals he can harvest — and so there are no official records to suggest whether or not he is cropping all he can.

In 1974 the price of an impala carcass in Rhodesia was R9, in Johannesburg the wholesale price was R18. Rhodesian game ranchers have turned to safaris as a more profitable line than meat, but in South Africa, where venison prices have risen steadily, meat is less of a losing line. In fact the Kruger National Park — which is not managed for meat production — is making a profit from venison and biltong sales.

Some years ago an expensive meat processing factory was set up at Kruger to process the surplus game culled in the park. "Since management is based on removing only the surplus animals that absolutely must be taken to maintain the health of the biotic communities, there are times when the facility is not running at all, and other times when it is operated at much below capacity," says the report. Yet despite this a profit which was only about R436 in 1972-73 (4 091 animals) became a profit of about R133 000 in 1973-74 (4 438 animals) and about R152 700 in just ten months in 1974 (2 438 animals). The Mossmans suggest that lowveld farmers with game to sell could consider using the Kruger Park's factory facilities.

The Mossmans believe that game ranching has proved itself an economic form of land-use which could well compete with cattle in many areas.

"If game ranching is to be a viable form of land-use," they say, "the legal regulations for game ranching should be similar to those set up for agriculture. At the moment probably the greatest impediments to game ranching are the laws and regulations that were either designed to cover only domestic livestock production or were specifically promulgated to protect it from the competition of wildlife products. The extent to which such legislation has been enacted is really a confirmation that the livestock interest and the veterinarians who usually identify very closely with them, are apprehensive that game can do better than domestic livestock if given the chance. There is no need for such concern in a protein-hungry world if its institutions are designed as much, or more, for human welfare as for the accumulation of capital.

"Commercial game ranching needs government support similar to that presently provided for conventional agriculture. Examples are biological, sociological and economic research; range and wildlife extension services; changes in the laws; public education; financial assistance of various kinds; market analysis services and assistance from wildlife veterinarians.

"The rationale for providing such services is basically the same as for providing government support for conventional agriculture ... governments need to be sure that there will be food for their people. Game ranching is one of the few relatively untapped means for doing so that remain in today's world."

The report lists assistance presently available to game ranchers, most of it the spin-off of research undertaken in national

parks and reserves. However there is some aid directed at the game rancher himself, such as the Natal Parks Board booklet, *Ungulate Management on Private Lands in Natal* (presently out of stock due to demand). Developments since the Mossman tour of South Africa include "Northern Cape Springbok" — a campaign to get Northern Cape farmers involved in venison production, and the public involved in buying the meat. Members of the Wildlife Society have played a leading role in the development of game ranching in this part of South Africa, and the Northern Cape Branch of the Society produced a booklet to help the would-be rancher: *"Springbok Management"*.

Game ranching receives its income from live game sales, game viewing, photography and sport hunting. While there may be little help for the game rancher intent on meat production, government tourist boards, private tourist agencies and safari operators are willing to offer help in developing the recreational potential of game ranches.

"Planners should recognise both the great potential of tourism for earning foreign exchange and also its dependence on world economic and political circumstances," says the Mossman report. "They should also recognise the political problems that may develop when emphasis on tourism neglects the interests of local inhabitants."

And the Mossmans feel that nobody has yet tested what could be the most promising aspect of game ranching.

"We feel that the most significant contribution of game ranching will prove to be the supply of food to local people very much in need of it. This contribution will best be measured in terms of human welfare rather than monetary terms. To date the direct provision of food and other products to local people has been a minor aspect of game ranching.

"It is entirely possible that under subsistence conditions in the sub-humid tropics a game ranch of 10 000 ha marginal land could support 1 000 people as soon as optimum productivity is attained.

"Practically all birds and mammals, some reptiles, almost all fish, certain insects and some wild plants are consumed by someone. What is objectionable to some people may be considered a delicacy by others. We have met Africans who prefer zebra meat over that of eland and others who consider that the jaw muscles of a dassie are the most delectable of all.

"... almost the only place left for us to obtain additional food to support our increasing populations is the remaining uncultivated land with its wildlife products. Game ranching has laid some of the practical groundwork for such utilisation but its potential goes far beyond use of the species usually recognised as "game" in the developed countries.

"Much remains to be learned." □

Wildlife Utilisation and Game Ranching: Report on a study of recent progress in this field in Southern Africa, by Sue Lee Mossman and Archie S. Mossman, IUCN Occasional Paper No. 17, obtainable from IUCN, 1110 Morges, Switzerland, at four dollars.