


Walking with your flock...

➞ by Prof. Gareth Bath



"Going the extra mile" is a biblical phrase (in Matthew) that urges us to do more than just the bare minimum. This is as true of caring for sheep as it is for everything else of value. We have often heard the sage advice from a farmer after a lifetime crowned with success: "Look after your sheep, and they will look after you". But what does going the extra mile for your sheep actually mean?



By doing nothing, we can only expect nothing, and by doing the minimum we will not get much more, other than perhaps staying out of trouble. Consumers of wool, meat and other products definitely expect care that exceeds the bare minimum. Animals that are well cared for will repay this kindness. Are we proud of the way our animals are handled, fed and bred? Can we show everything that we do on the farm to our town cousins without feeling apologetic or defensive? Most farmers are proud of their livestock and try to do the right things, so what can you do to go that extra mile? Here are some questions to ask yourself if you want to know whether you are doing enough.

Facilities

Are the kraals and crushes safe, is water available, is there any shade, is there good flooring or does it become a mud bath after rain? None of these will kill the sheep, but could we do better?

Procedures

Are all the procedures that are done really necessary, or do we do things like castrating animals just because that's what we have always done? Are they done at the right time, with proper equipment, by well-trained staff? Do we take every precaution to prevent things going wrong? Do the staff know that with sheep, silence does not mean they are content? Just because sheep don't protest and bleat (like goats do) does not mean they are not suffering. It is possible to do the most disgraceful things to sheep if their silence is misunderstood.

Handling

Do farmworkers understand the behaviour of sheep, how to handle them, and move them between paddocks? Is transporting animals done in ways that minimise the chances of injury or suffering?

Feeding

Is the feed supply adequate for the requirements at each stage of production? There have been many good articles over the years in *Wolboer/Wool Farmer* on veld management, crop residue utilisation, pastures and supplements, but adapting them for implementation on each farm needs

(TURN PAGE)

careful consideration by farmers and advisers. Poor feeding means poor breeding – and just about everything else. Provision for drought is a good example of going the extra mile. Farmers with good plans emerged from the last serious drought with the least damage.

Breeding

The extra care needed at mating, during pregnancy and lactation is costly but the returns justify the expense. Beyond good production and profits, we also create good welfare – less disease, more and healthier lambs, better growth and more contented animals.

Selection

Using the right type of sheep for the farming environment means not just a better return on investment, but also a more balanced sheep, which incurs lower costs and is less susceptible to poor production and disease. A good example is when wool sheep are bred for resistance to wireworm – they need far less treatment but still produce well and do not suffer the effects of the parasite. This is not a theoretical concept, it is already being implemented by leading farmers.

Good feed supply, with the necessary nutrition added through supplements, when necessary, is essential for healthy, productive animals.



Purchases

Buying the wrong kind of sheep for the circumstances is bad enough, but even worse is buying sheep carrying a disease that can affect the whole flock. Apart from monetary considerations, this imposes avoidable suffering in the flock. Always insist on a vendor declaration.

Plans and programmes

Annual threats to production, profit and animal welfare include infectious diseases, parasites and plant poisons. Each one requires surveillance, monitoring, prevention and amelioration. Disasters like fires, floods and droughts also deserve frequent consideration, review and revision. Prevention is the first and most important protection against harm, but we also need well-thought-out plans for what to do if and when disaster strikes, and how to minimise damage to the animals.

WHAT TO DO, AND WHERE TO START

Farmers are busy people and can't do everything, certainly not in one year. So, it is better to draw up a list of things that need improvement, and then prioritise them. Rather do a few things well than many things badly. Keep that list in sight and make sure that at least some items can be ticked off the list every year. Pride in these improvements will be justified and farmers are entitled to feel that they've gone the extra mile for their livestock, enabling them to live a happier and more contented life, and produce more for the benefit of those who depend on the farm for a livelihood. 