Game farmer turns problems into profits

What does one do with loads of inedible waste from your farm abattoir?
Feed some lions!

Since early in his farming career, Mr. Piet Warren of the farm Josephine, Gravelotte, has managed to turn a problem into an opportunity. This approach played a major role in his selection as Northern Game Farmer of the Year 2004.

In addition to his large beef production system, Piet also farms with lion, rhino and sable antelope – each born from a problem turned into a unique new opportunity.

When he started farming, he had a loan which had to be repaid at a fixed time. For this purpose a group of weaners were fattened up for the market, but when the time came, he was unable to obtain a permit.

This problem was solved by buying a butchery, which required his own abattoir and, eventually, his own feedlot. Today he slaughters an average of 2 500 cattle per month, which created a new problem to be turned into an opportunity: lions to eat the waste!

But let’s take a look at how this Brahman stud and beef cattle farmer first switched to game farming – with the sable antelope.

These antelope occurred naturally on his land. However, while they had not been hunted to a large extent, their numbers were dwindling over the years until, in 1996, only 39 were left. Research as early as 1982 indicated that the offspring of inbred sables have a poor chance of survival.

Warren then captured all the cows, bought a bull from Zimbabwe and moved them to a 2 000 ha farm near Tolwe, where there was hardly any other game and no predators, since the neighbours were farming with vegetables at the time.

His success caught him off guard. The antelope multiplied at an unbelievable rate, with a weaning percentage of 80 and higher. But then his neighbours also started farming with game, attracting caracal, jackal and other predators. It was not long before he was back where he started. He then moved the antelope from Tolwe back to Gravelotte and established them in small predator-proof camps of about 20 hectares each. Meanwhile he bought five bulls from Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Today he has 24 adult sable cows, most of which have been bred with Zambian blood, resulting in a major improvement in weaning percentage and horn length. Although the Zambian bulls are more expensive than those from Zimbabwe, they breed horns that are at least 70 mm to 100 mm longer. And a 70 mm longer horn means an extra $2 000 (R13 000) for each animal hunted.

Last year the calving percentage was 85, while only one calf was lost. Calves are especially vulnerable as the cows hide them in the veld where predators sniff them out and eat them.
The intensive care also made it possible to develop a protein rich feed for the antelope, containing all the necessary trace elements and ample vitamins. In addition to the feed, which consists mainly of ground lucern and germ of maize, the animals also get citrus peels and lucern as soon as grass becomes scarce.

Feeding the animals well improves the animals’ survival and growth rates. And, with the extra power obtained through crossbreeding with foreign bulls, some of the bulls boast horns 1 000 mm (40 inches) long and are ready to be hunted at age three and a half or four years. In the wild, bulls only obtain horns of this length at six years of age.

“My animals’ horns grow by up to 250 mm per month, and every extra 750 mm increases its value by approximately $2 000 (± R13 000),” he says.

Warren acquired the lions when all the inedible waste from the abattoirs became a problem. Each of the 2 500 cattle slaughtered every month produces about 5 kg of such waste – more than 10 tons per month.

“In the past we would burn it, which proved a major operation. When we tried burying it, homeless people would dig the meat out and eat it. We covered it in lime to break it down, but they would just rinse it off. Not even pouring diesel over it and setting it alight could deter them. In the process the Health Department was getting more and more agitated.

“One day I was talking to a professional hunter, who told me that he would buy each lion I could deliver to him for ethical hunting purposes, for at least $10 000 (± R60 500),” Warren says.

“That was 1999. All the lions that that hunter could lay his hands on, were sold up to three years in advance. That’s how great the demand was. And in addition to the financial benefits, I saw a solution to my slaughter waste problem.”

On the farm Lekkersmaak, which formed part of the Selati Game Reserve, there were 18 lions which the management could not cope with. So he bought the farm, lions and all! His lions are therefore not captured wild animals – he bought them all and today farms with them as he would with any other animal on the farm. It is no environmental or conservation exercise.

Females are selected and mated with specific males to produce darker lions with black manes, which are sought after among hunters. Females that fail to fall pregnant, are culled. Since the food, labour and infrastructure to keep a lion for up to five years cost around R25 000, she has to make way for another if she does not produce.

The hunting price for a male is around $12 000 (± R78 000) at four and a half years, at five years he is worth $14 000 (R91 000) and at seven years a hunter will pay up to $20 000 (R130 000) for it. A large male with a thick black mane could fetch up to $25 000 (R162 500).

“Lions are amazing animals to farm with,” says Warren. “They are lazy and all they wish to do is eat and breed. You can feed them with any meat – they eat anything. As far as they are concerned, there is no such thing as rotten meat.
“The lions only get meat that is unfit for human consumption; they do not compete for food with humans. Each lion consumes about 1.5 tons of meat per year – waste that used to constitute a health problem.

“In fact, I now buy any waste meat (dead chickens, horses, cattle, dairy calves), that formerly caused problems for everyone in the area, at R2 per kilogram. Instead of costing money to get rid of, as in the past, it now provides an income,” Warren says.

However, lions suffer from congestion of the stomach if they have too much fatty meat, and that is where the chickens with feathers provide some variation. And by giving the lions enough food, each female rewards him with a litter every eight months.

“A strange male will kill the female’s offspring in the wild, after which she will immediately come into oestrus again. Here we wean the young at around 10 to 12 weeks, remove them from the mother, and two weeks later she is back in oestrus. This system easily produces two litters in the same time it takes to raise one litter in nature.”

In order for the lions to be hunted, they need to be released and rehabilitated. Some are also sold at auctions.

According to Warren, game farming is not only very profitable, it also helps restoring the environment which had been badly damaged by overgrazing. Bush encroachment has made successful cattle farming in the area just about impossible at today’s beef prices.

His main concern, however, is the profitability of game farming. The conservation of scarce or endangered species and the improved veld resulting from it, are added bonuses.

**Rhino horns have great potential**

Mr. Piet Warren went into rhino farming because of a tax problem. He has since found out how valuable these animals are, as rhino horn is much more expensive than gold when peddled in Eastern city streets.

Apart from the value attached to it as sex stimulant, young and old are treated with it for just about every illness you can think of. That is why Orientals pay up to $128 (more than R800) per gram for rhino horn in its final processed form.

While he will not – and is not allowed to – sell rhino horn, he started harvesting it in the hope that it will be legalised in the future. Horns cut off four years ago are growing back at 400 g to 600 g per year. Therefore, by cutting and marketing the horn every four years, one would make about R44 000 per rhino per year (at 2002 prices). Warren did take into account that the price would probably be halved should rhino horn trade be legalised. What is more, the producer normally receives only a quarter of the selling price of any product.

“We are wrestling with the authorities to try and have it legalised – just imagine how well rhinos will be looked after if they can provide such an income,” Warren says.
However, in addition to the value of the horns, a just weaned female is worth about R130 000 today, and a male calf about R40 000 to R50 000. These calculations made him realise that rhinos should be looked after, and he began feeding them.

When lucerne prices went through the roof, he had to make another plan. He talked to the experts, who recommended rations similar to those for horses.

He went ahead and made his own feedmix rich in protein, vitamins and trace elements, but without urea. No roughage was necessary, because with a mouth like a baler the rhino gets enough of that in the veld. With this supplementary feed his rhinos now calve every two years, instead of every three years as in the wild. The feedmix also enables the rhinos to make better use of the natural veld.