The Australian goat industries

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Australia has a feral goat population of 4 - 5 million animals, originating from European Landrace types brought in by early settlers. These animals have been exploited commercially such that there is:
♦ a large goat meat export industry (largest in the world)
♦ small but lucrative cashmere and mohair industries

A small but lucrative dairy goat industry exists around the major cities, based on milk breeds imported in the 1920's. Recently dairy goats have been exported to Taiwan.

The meat industry
The Australian goat meat industry is based on the harvest of feral animals; over one million were slaughtered and exported, as frozen carcasses, from NSW alone in 1997. The feral harvest is worth about A$20 million per year, while hides and hair are valued at A$3.5 million (1993/94).

The fibre industries
Although Angora goats were imported as early as the 1860's, modern exploitation began only in the 1960's. Cashmere was found in feral goats in the late 1970's and commercial exploitation began shortly after. Both cashmere and mohair breeders drew heavily on feral goats for base breeding stock and domestic goat numbers grew rapidly in the 1980's peaking in 1989. Severe drought and economic problems with other agricultural commodities have lead to a recent downturn in numbers.

Domestic goat numbers have stabilised around 300,000 generally on mixed grazing enterprises. Interest in fibre goats has waned, but interest in meat production has increased due to the importation of the Boer goat (released in 1995). There is interest in dual purpose animals producing meat and fibre. Boer goats are being crossed over cashmere herds, and Texan and South African Angora goats are reported to increase mohair quality and quantity as well as meat yield in the Australian Angora. Australia currently produces 350 tonnes of mohair and 18 tonnes of cashmere annually.

Indirect benefits of goat enterprises
Considerable research has been done on using goats for pasture and range management, and the valuable role of goats is widely recognised. The major benefits of using goats for weed control include:
♦ increased efficiency and effectiveness of weed control
♦ reduced use of chemicals
♦ increased use of all herbage
♦ reduced costs of weed control
♦ improved animal production
It is difficult to quantify the indirect benefits of using goats for weed control but it is estimated that savings of A$400 million annually are possible due to the reduced vegetable contamination in wool. Other indirect benefits of direct financial interest include improved carrying capacity and production from complementary grazers.

The future
The goat industries appear to be recovering from the effects of drought and economic downturn of the early and mid-1990's. Expansion is constrained by a downturn in cashmere and mohair prices, marketing and infrastructure problems and the difficulty in disposing of surplus stock. While the potential for goat meat exports is well recognised, domestic production cannot compete with feral harvesting. Commercial meat goat breeders are seeking different, more specific markets. Pressure to reduce the feral population in the fragile environments of outback Australia should encourage the trend towards farmed goats, and goats will remain an important tool for range management and weed control.