More beef from the Kimberleys

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BEEF production in the Kimberleys is an industry which has eked out a precarious existence for many years. Today it is offered an unprecedented opportunity for expansion on sound economic lines, and it is the purpose of this article to offer some suggestions as to how this may best be achieved.

Firstly, let us attempt to review some of the factors which have resulted in beef-hungry countries throughout the world clamouring for substantial additions to their present meagre rations.

Undoubtedly the main group of factors are those originating in Argentina, a country which in pre-war years exported a tremendous tonnage of excellent chilled beef to British and other markets. Political moves in Argentina have whittled down the formerly extensive spheres of British influence in the pastoral, commercial and industrial life of the republic, and Britain no longer occupies a favoured position as a beef buyer.

According to reports there has also been a marked decline in the quantities of beef produced in Argentina, due to unwise land use and a serious lack of rural labour. Increasing industrial activity in the cities has drawn people from the land, and the higher wages offered in the factories have resulted in higher home consumption of beef with a corresponding reduction in exports. Added to these has been the disinclination of the Argentinian Government to make beef available at satisfactory prices.

As beef is not a product which lends itself to heavy short-term increases in production it certainly appears that the existing shortage will not be overcome within the next few years.
There is very little fencing in the Kimberleys and on the majority of the properties bulls, cows, calves, weaners and in some cases bullocks are all running together. Where bullock paddocks are provided, their main purpose is to facilitate mustering for sale.

NO CONTROLLED MATING

Little or no supervision of breeding is possible so that good quality bulls are able to mate with nondescript females of any age, and conversely, rough scrub bulls from the home or adjoining leases can mate with the best quality cows. Owing to this lack of supervision the bulls are not well distributed throughout the properties and there may be too many in one section and not enough in others. During the drought period of the year, and in many cases earlier, most cows suffer from a form of temporary sterility and do not come into season, so that the bulls tend to drift away from the herds.

Owing to the low nutritional standards, a number of the cows do not mate every year and in the barren intervals they may remain in fairly good condition. Other cows in very low condition may often be found nursing both a young calf and the previous year's weaner. With no supervision over mating, many two-year-old cows give birth to calves sired by big-framed bulls and a great many of them die when calving. Others that survive the ordeal remain stunted in growth and constitutionally weak for life. Cows which are suckling calves may become badly

KIMBERLEY CONDITIONS

Before listing the fundamental requirements of a sound and economic production programme for the Kimberleys, it might be well to review the present conditions of the industry in these areas.

Although there are fairly wide variations on different stations and in different districts, the following conditions apply generally throughout the Kimberleys.

From about January to March pastures commence to grow vigorously in response to the monsoonal rains, with the result that from about April to June there is ample green grass and plentiful surface water. During this period stock improve rapidly and all classes of cattle are usually in good condition.

From July onward the feed dries out rapidly and towards the end of September stock are rapidly losing flesh and beginning to weaken. Serious drought conditions usually exist from October to December and even dry stock are only in backward store condition. Weaners and cows with calves become very thin and weak.

Fig. 1.—At Glenroy Station, Air Beef Pty. Ltd. is operating an inland abattoir and transporting the carcasses by Bristol Freighter aircraft to the Wyndham Meatworks. Photo shows cattle in the holding yards with the aircraft and loading gantry in the background.

—Photo by courtesy of West Australian Newspapers Ltd.
affected with "creeps" or "pegleg" which is one of the main symptoms of phosphorus deficiency.

With the advent of the green feed, a large number of the cows come into season and the bulls, also freshened by young nutritious pastures, again return to work. This breeding cycle results in a large percentage of the calves being dropped well after the flush period of the year so that they are born during the dry season when the cow is endeavouring to exist on pasture, the low nutritional value of which is insufficient to serve even as a maintenance ration.

As cows living under these conditions are unable to produce sufficient milk to maintain the calves, a great many young cattle die although they may exist long enough to have been included in the year's branding tally, and to have dragged their mothers down to a state of poverty from which there is no recovery.

**UNPROFITABLE STOCK**

All cattle are bred and, with few exceptions, live their whole lives on the one lease until the bullocks are old enough and strong enough to walk to a meatworks or a ship. Due to the fact that no store market is available to Kimberley cattlemen, any bullocks not sufficiently well fleshted to show a net return after all expenses associated with their sale are deducted, must be held on the lease and given a chance to increase in weight.

This results in the holding on the station of many aged store bullocks for which there is no sale. These cattle far from being an asset, are a distinct liability. Every day that they are retained on the run, they are consuming grass and water which could be better utilised in maintaining a cow with a calf or in increasing the weight of younger and better quality steers.

Most Kimberley cattlemen are branding 20 per cent. to 25 per cent. of their herd numbers, keeping their annual crops of heifers as breeders to maintain their branding numbers and they are consequently only able to sell about 10 per cent. of their herds annually.

These figures suggest that twice the number of cattle die or are wasted every year as are sold, and in view of the fact that Australia is freer from stock diseases than any other cattle-raising country in the world they suggest that all is not well with our beef industry. Australian sheepmen are recognized as the world's best, and I am convinced that by an overhaul of our beef production methods it should be possible to lift the cattle industry to the social and financial status of the sheep industry.

It is my opinion that the two main factors responsible for the terrific wastage in cattle and beef in Northern Aus-
tralia are the mineral deficiencies in the diet of the cattle, and the current methods of open-range uncontrolled breeding.

THE NEED FOR MINERALS

Back in the days of white moleskin pants and red shirts, cattle-raising was mainly a rule-of-thumb business. Land was cheap and plentiful and a herd located on country which provided grass and water for most of the year could generally be depended upon to produce sufficient saleable stock each year to cover expenses and show a profit. Since then, many areas have been overstocked with consequent reduction in both the quality and the quantity of the feed. In countries where the aim is to produce store cattle to pass along to the fatteners this rule-of-thumb system may still provide reasonably good returns. Unfortunately, there is no store market for Kimberley cattle, and the climatic conditions and the nature of the terrain are such that tons of good beef is walked off the cattle before they can be slaughtered at the coastal meatworks or shipped alive to the southern markets.

The manner in which the industry is conducted at present does not lend itself to the production of accurate statistics so it is difficult to support my contentions by any actual figures but I am convinced that many of the handicaps imposed by lack of protein in the fodder could be offset to a large extent if we were able to remedy another important deficiency—that of minerals.

Over most of the world's cattle-raising areas, a new conception of livestock husbandry has come into being as a result of scientific studies of animal nutrition. The importance of minerals in the diet, for instance, has but recently received full recognition and modern cattlemen no longer believe that a bellyfull of grass and adequate water is all a herd needs to breed healthy calves and produce payable quantities of beef.

Certain minerals are as necessary for the adequate nutrition of cattle as is the grass itself and, even where feed is abundant, if it does not supply these minerals the cattle will suffer from malnutrition and disease just as certainly as, though perhaps more slowly than, if there was an actual shortage of feed.

Throughout the best feed months in the year in the Kimberleys when the stock are grazing on young green grass, all cattle do well and improve rapidly in strength and fleshing. During this period there is little evidence that the cattle are affected by any nutritional deficiencies, but that does NOT apply after the grass has dried out.

PHOSPHORUS IS ESSENTIAL

There appears to be little evidence as yet that Kimberley cattle are seriously deficient in any minerals other than phosphorus but this mineral is essential to successful cattle and beef production. In combination with its
partner, calcium (lime), phosphorus is primarily required to build up the skeleton of the animal.

Where there is a serious deficiency, or an imbalance of phosphorus and lime in the feed, healthy bone cannot be formed and the growth, weight, fertility and milk production of the animals are adversely affected. These symptoms are noted in most cases of phosphorus deficiency and accompanying them is depraved appetite, the most common evidence of which is a craving for bones and the chewing of carrion and all kinds of rubbish.

This depraved appetite may lead to excessive salt consumption where salt is available to the cattle, and where stock eat carrion such as decaying carcases they are liable to die from a secondary disease known as botulism or "toxic paralysis".

Continued phosphorus deficiency among cows nursing calves results in the disease commonly known as "creeps" or "pegleg" which is characterised by bone changes, lameness and stiffness of the joints when walking. "Creeps" is usually the final stage of the deficiency disease and many cows in this condition will die unless their calves are weaned to prevent the heavy drain on the system, or unless they are supplied with adequate amounts of phosphorus to meet their requirements.

It has been estimated that about 85 per cent. of the phosphorus in an animal's body is contained in the skeleton. Most of the remaining 15 per cent. is in the body tissues with some always in the blood to meet the phosphorus requirements of all parts of the body. Approximately one-tenth of the weight of an animal's skeleton consists of phosphorus, therefore a cow weighing 1,000 lb. with a skeleton weighing about 150 lb. should contain in her bones about 15 lb. of phosphorus. Her tissues and blood should contain approximately another 2 lb. so that there should be about 17 lb. of phosphorus in her body. As the cow grows and builds more bone, puts on flesh or makes milk to rear a calf she requires additional phosphorus if she is to remain in good health.

Extensive research into cattle-raising on phosphorus-deficient pastures has been carried out in overseas countries for many years. In this country also, the stage of growth of the pastures has been found to be an influential factor in determining its phosphorus content. Fresh new pasture growth contains much more phosphorus than at any other stage of development. When pasture has matured and dried its phosphorus content is very low.

(In the second portion of this article which will appear in the May-June issue, the author discusses the possibilities of providing a phosphatic supplement for station cattle and makes some suggestions for improving herd management.)
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