

Company: DN & AM Stewart-Moore

1. Enterprise description and goals:

- 46,000ha Mitchell grass, NW Qld, woolgrowing, beef cattle
- Dingoes destroyed 15%+pa of flock late 90's, early 2000's
- Introduced Maremma stockguarding dogs 2002, solved problem.
- Confidence now to introduce Dohne Merinos for dual purpose enterprise
- Niche opportunity for sheepmeat in North Qld as others leave industry.

2. Labour efficiency and profitability

Woolgrowing has a number of distinct advantages in this area;

- Almost no diseases or deficiencies
- Only very occasional worm burdens
- Very little vegetable fault
- Able to run large mobs for labour efficiency, easy mustering in open country
- Can hang on longer in dry times than cattle
- Complementary effect of running both sheep and cattle can increase carrying capacity significantly

There are also some disadvantages;

- Wool cuts are less than further south
- Also lambing % less, both due to being in the tropics
- Long distance from markets, especially for meatworks sheep

All these factors add up to Gross Margin comparisons between sheep and cattle enterprises being roughly in the same ballpark with added advantages of enterprise diversity and the complementary grazing effect.

Currently labour is 10-15,000DSE/labour unit, depending on season, having been 5-8,000 before motorbikes, two-way radios and laneways were introduced.

Apart from the initial introductory phase, the labour for managing 20 Maremma stockguarding dogs is similar to that spent on more conventional predator control measures, but far more pleasant and rewarding. Annual running cost of the dogs equates to around 50c/head of sheep p.a.

3. Production systems:

- Dingoes about to force us out of sheep, despite baiting, trapping, and shooting.
- Decided to try one last thing, i.e. the introduction of Maremma stockguarding dogs.

There weren't any others successfully doing this on the scale of our operation, at the time 20,000 sheep running in mobs of 1-3,000 in 1-2,000ha paddocks, so we had to adapt the experiences of more intensive examples to suit our situation.

We have learnt four key elements that are essential to the successful use of stockguarding dogs:

1. Pups must be bonded with the livestock that they are to live with and protect, from an early age, preferably as soon as their eyes are open.
2. All dogs running in a free-range situation must be desexed, to prevent the risk of interbreeding with wild dogs, and to keep their mind on the job.
3. Pedigrees of all stockguarding dogs purchased must be checked thoroughly as a half-breed will often look right but will not have the required instincts.
4. There is a fine balance of human contact required, enough to be able to manage their health requirements, but not so much that they prefer to be around you instead of their flock.

4. Enterprise development:

Having solved the predator problem, we now have the confidence to go forward and latch on to an opportunity created by dingoes forcing a lot of sheep enterprises out of the region!

- Dohne rams introduced in 2005
- Some irony in selling the last of the Merino rams in 2006, our families 100th year on this property with merinos
- All lamb consumed in North Qld, in excess of 500,000 carcasses p.a., comes from the south
- Currently developing a country killed range of sheepmeat products using an on farm feedlot and killing at the local abattoir
- Future development of the market will aim at promoting a clean, green, lean, local product
- Dohne sheep are expected to only minimally reduce wool cuts in this environment, if at all, whilst their better foraging ability and earlier maturity will improve lambing percentages
- Distance from sheep meatworks will be solved by marketing most, or eventually all sheep locally, these last two points addressing all of the disadvantages mentioned above.
- This production system will improve regular cashflow in the business and reduce climate risk as the product can be turned off regardless of season.

5. Environmental impacts and benefits:

Running stockguarding dogs with our flock has provided a number of significant advantages:

- No chemicals i.e. 1080 and strychnine are used
- An ecological balance of domestic livestock and native species is being achieved
- Kangaroo and wild pig numbers have been reduced but not eradicated
- Predation from the protected Wedgetail Eaglehawk is also reducing
- We are learning to live with the pests rather than raging an all out war against them
- Reducing paddock sizes has made the stockguarding dogs job a lot easier, and has allowed for country to be rested, improving long term sustainability

6. Your farming life:

It all comes into perspective, when you are responsible for a large number of animals and you always put their needs before your own. Our situation was untenable as the dingo massacres continued and often we would go to bed knowing that some sheep would be ripped apart that night. We no longer wanted responsibility for that.

The decision had to be made, find a way to put a stop to the dingo massacres, or sell the sheep, and leave the industry.

Now with Maremmas doing the nightwatch, we can go to bed in peace, knowing the sheep are safe.

7. Your international study tour:

I would go to two places;

1. The Maremma Plains in Italy where these wonderful dogs come from, to get insights into how they are worked and managed on their home territory, as the breed is over 2000 years old.
2. Secondly, the USA where a number of studies have been done by various universities comparing the effectiveness of different stockguarding breeds in different situations. I believe there is so much more to learn, and that this is truly the way of the future.

One Final Comment

Our 12,000 sheep are totally protected from wild dogs, and they do not cost 1c of the \$33m that is spent or lost in Qld every year to unsuccessfully control wild dogs!

