
Some Insights On Raising Rabbits In The Third World

I have talked with some development workers who have been very positive about the role of rabbits in their work. But others have been equally negative. Fremont Regier has worked for some time in Zaire and now in Botswana. He was recommended to me as one who is both successful and enthusiastic about rabbits. So I wrote and asked him why rabbits catch on with one person/place and fail with another. He not only sent a thoughtful reply to this question but included a write-up for volunteers called "Some planning ideas to remember when considering rabbit production as a church project." We'll be happy to send you a copy of all of this upon request. But some highlights are summarized here.

"In questioning many one-time rabbit raisers who later abandoned the work, I got many reasons why they stopped. Some said their rabbits died, others that they couldn't sell them, or that they had no food. In questioning other raisers who had continued to raise rabbits, I was told that rabbits do not die for no reason (hunger or ill care of dirty cages cause it), that these people had no trouble selling any rabbits they had and that feed was available. I surmised that in many cases it boils down to the fact that it just takes too much time and work for some people. Not that this is necessarily bad. But you can't raise rabbits with no work or with as little work as an equal number of chickens would take."

Another problem is the greater need for management. "A man can have a flock of chickens, throw them a bit of grain occasionally, shut them up in his kitchen at night and get away with it. Much more is required of the rabbit raiser. We found that it is best to start with a farmer who has had no experience with rabbits than with a man who has "raised" rabbits before under improper methods of letting them run around the house. Also, farmers need regular visits to train, give new ideas, support, trouble-shoot etc. ...In areas where the traditional scavenger method of animal husbandry has been practiced, where animals are largely left to find their own livelihood, a fundamental change in attitude must take place for rabbits to be successful. To cage and regularly feed the animal is quite foreign, especially when the farmer and his family may be hungry. We must not underestimate this educational process."

To be economically feasible, the rabbit project must be based primarily on large amounts of green roughage. Though weight gain will not be as rapid, the gains will be inexpensive. The beauty of the rabbit in this situation is that it converts cheap roughage unfit for human consumption into meat of very high quality.

We then received an unexpected letter on the same subject from Gary Shepard in Nepal. "About 8 years ago I tried raising rabbits in the village, but nearly all the 80 young died and I gave up. Last fall I got a few tips and raising rabbits has caught on

like wildfire now. The important points were: (1) Clean the pen daily, i.e, throw out all old grass etc. (2) keep feed off the bottom of the pen by either building a feed rack or tying it up. (3) Make sure villagers build pens with bottom slats of bamboo or wooden rods so that it is as self cleaning as possible. (4) Avoid giving grass that is wet during the hot season. Though you might get away with it for a month or more, one day you will find that a bunch have died overnight. Cut grass in the morning and spread it out to dry excess moisture in a sheltered place (on top of the pen) and feed it in the evening. In the evening you can cut grass and dry it overnight. Rabbits do OK on a 90% banana leaf diet, but prefer a mix of foliage, weeds, etc. (5) Some books say not to give salt. This may be OK for cold climates, but if you don't you risk the mother killing and eating her young, as is common here in the monsoon season. But I have never known it to happen to those who feed a little salt. I put it in with a little ground grain made damp with water. Our villagers feed their rabbits a lot of mustard cake. They are far more profitable than chickens and require comparatively little grain."

I really appreciate receiving these kinds of letters. Let me hear from you about things experience has taught you.