

Draft Cattle Use in the Zambezi Region, Namibia

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Abstract

The Zambezi region in northeastern Namibia still has a functional and prosperous draft animal culture. Challenges can be identified in the increasingly difficult external conditions, which are exacerbated in particular by man-made climate change. Bush fires, epidemics, and droughts place enormous strain on draft cattle farmers. Intensive training of cattle is often not feasible. The same applies to the use of more animal-friendly and effective harnessing methods.

Résumé

La région du Zambèze, au nord-est de la Namibie, possède encore une culture d'animaux de trait qui fonctionne et est prospère. Les défis à relever sont liés à des conditions extérieures de plus en plus difficiles, exacerbées en particulier par le changement climatique anthropogène. Les feux de brousse, les épidémies et les sécheresses ont un impact énorme sur les éleveurs de bovins de trait. Un entraînement intensif des bovins n'est souvent pas possible. Il en va de même pour l'utilisation de méthodes d'attelage plus respectueuses des animaux et plus efficaces.

Kurzfassung

In der Sambesi-Region im Nordosten Namibias gibt es noch immer eine funktionierende und prosperierende Zugtierkultur. Herausforderungen ergeben sich aus den zunehmend schwierigen äußeren Bedingungen, die insbesondere durch den vom Menschen verursachten Klimawandel verschärft werden. Buschbrände, Epidemien und Dürren stellen eine enorme Belastung für die Zugrinderfarmer dar. Eine intensive Ausbildung der Rinder ist oft nicht möglich. Gleiches gilt für den Einsatz tierfreundlicherer und effektiverer Anbaumethoden.

Resumen

La región del Zambeze, en el noreste de Namibia, sigue teniendo una cultura ganadera funcional y próspera. Los retos surgen de las condiciones externas cada vez más difíciles, que se ven agravadas en particular por el cambio climático provocado por el hombre. Los incendios forestales, las epidemias y las sequías suponen una enorme presión para los ganaderos. A menudo no es posible adiestrar intensivamente al ganado. Lo mismo ocurre con el uso de métodos de arnés más eficaces y respetuosos con los animales.





Fig. 1 A team of four oxen wearing a traditional withers yoke (Photo: Joseph Simataa).

Introduction

The Zambezi region in the far northeast of Namibia is a narrow strip of land between Botswana, Zambia, and Angola. In the tropical climate that prevails there, the use of draft animals for agriculture and transport is still wide-

spread. A survey¹ conducted by the authors in October 2023 was intended to provide more detailed insights into the exact situation on the ground and, above all, to identify the greatest challenges and regional characteristics.

¹ For a detailed insight in the general survey structure used, please see Kropp / Dumitrescu in this volume.



Fig. 2 One of the most important uses for draft cattle in the Zambesi region is agriculture (Photo: Joseph Simataa).

Survey Results

A total of 23 individual survey questionnaires were collected for the region. Care was taken to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible, but the data base remains small at present.

Looking first at the size of the farms surveyed, these ranged between 3 and 4 hectares, with 72% of respondents using two pairs of oxen to cultivate their fields. Without exception, the animals belonged to the Sanga cattle group, a mostly zebu-type cattle breed that is commonly used in Namibia and other regions of Africa. The use of a simple withers yoke without specific adaptation to the individual animals was also a clear result of the survey. With an average usage time of four hours, all oxen without exception were used for agricultural work, and 63% were also utilized for transport tasks. The average age of the draft oxen was determined to be seven years.

Challenges

Respondents cited a variety of different challenges in connection with the keeping and use of draft animals. The most frequently cited problem was the persistent drought in the survey area, which often makes it impossible to feed the animals adequately and get them through the winter. This is also linked to the animals' suboptimal physical condition, which limits their resilience, especially when performing heavy work such as plowing. This situation is also exacerbated by the fact that the rain season in this region of Namibia is becoming shorter and shorter. Whereas conditions used to be favorable from November to February, this period has now been reduced to January and February only. This means that working cattle have significantly less time to recover physically after the dry season.

Another problem mentioned was the high incidence of various animal diseases, coupled with the fact that veterinary care is not always adequate or available at all. This also leads to increased mortality among draft cattle.

Finally, the devastating effects of fires were cited as a major challenge. These often lead to the destruction of grazing land for the animals and thus to a mutual reinforcement of the other problems already mentioned.

Reasons for draft cattle use

Essentially, four main reasons can be cited that were repeatedly mentioned by the respondents:

Firstly, it was repeatedly emphasized that working with draft cattle is a comparatively inexpensive method of working compared to other options (e.g. combustion engines). Furthermore, the simplicity of harnessing and working with cattle was also emphasized in this context—animals are often yoked with experienced oxen and put to work without a long training period.

Another main reason is seen in the multifunctionality of draft cattle. Cattle are extremely versatile, especially in transportation, and are sometimes even used to transport small boats over land to the nearest body of water. Multifunctionality in this context also means the value of the products of the animal, both the primary (meat, skin) and well as secondary (milk) ones.

Finally, the fourth main reason given for the use of draft cattle was their sociocultural significance. Many of the respondents identified working with oxen as an integral part of their culture.

Summary

It is striking that the Zambezi region can still be said to have a functional and prosperous draft animal culture. The challenges lie less in the loss of people who want to continue working with draft cattle and more in the increasingly difficult external conditions, which are exacerbated in particular by man-made climate change. Bush fires, epidemics, and droughts place enormous strain on draft cattle farmers. Intensive training of cattle, which can otherwise be advantageous in terms of precise work in the field, is often not realistically feasible. The same applies to the use of more animal-friendly and effective harnessing methods.





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