

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Grasscutters that provide food, not manicured

lawns

It goes without saying that the US drought is creating extremely serious problems for crop farmers, livestock producers, ethanol producers and other demanders of grain. The economic consequences are likely to be horrendous. But a reduction in grain supply does not spell famine in this country.

This is a luxury that does not describe a lot of other countries—the availability of grain can mean the difference between living and starving-to-death. But what if there was an efficient, relatively-quick-way to convert grasses to a high protein and nutrition-laden food?

In the past we have written about crops that US farmers would consider unusual, but hold promise to help expand food sources in the developing world. But for us, none tops what we saw on the cover of the August 2012 issue of “World Ark,” the magazine of Heifer International: “Rodents of unusual size.” With a title like on the magazine of an organization that provides small farmers around the world with breeding stock, we turned immediately to page 20 to see what they were talking about.

As kids, we remember raising money in our Sunday School classes to buy a pregnant heifer that would be given to a struggling farmer in Africa or South America with the condition that the recipient would give the first calf to another farmer. But, a rodent?

In this case we are talking about a fairly large rodent called a grasscutter that is in the process of being domesticated from wild stock. Grasscutters are found in grassy areas in Sub-Saharan Africa and are one of the bush meats that traditionally have been hunted to put meat on the table.

While the grasscutter is plentiful in the wild, the process of hunting it has serious environmental consequences. Grasscutters, along with other wild animals, are an important source of protein for people in Africa. The meat is high in protein, calcium, and phosphorus and low in fat. It is a highly sought out meat and is considered to be a delicacy.

Hunting parties often set fire to grassy areas in order to force the grasscutters out into the open where they can be captured. But the fires that flush out the grasscutters also destroy the habitat of other animals and kill trees and shrubs, resulting in a degraded environment. In addition, the fire also can spread beyond the grassland and destroy field crops as well.

The challenge faced by Heifer International and

other groups was to find a way to establish a population of grasscutters that would thrive and reproduce in captivity. According to a paper by M.N. Opara—“The Grasscutter I: A livestock of tomorrow” <http://scialert.net/fulltext/?doi=rjf.2010.119.135&org=10> —“In Benin, losses among captive grasscutters amounted to nearly 80 percent.”

Beginning in the 1970s, this death rate and high startup costs had stymied Heifer International’s introduction of the domestic production of grasscutters into Ghana. By 1999, they decided to revisit the issue and discovered that farmers in Benin, with the help of a German development organization, were having success with the domestic production of grasscutters.

Heifer International decided to purchase their initial stock from grasscutter farmers in Benin. Today, the grasscutter program in Ghana is very successful as current farmers train future farmers and sell them breeding stock.

One of the advantages of grasscutters over more conventional animals is that they are well adapted to the local climate, are resistant to many diseases, and can be raised by people with small farming plots. They can even be raised on rooftops in peri-urban areas. Grasscutters thrive on grass and a wide variety of other inexpensive vegetal products.

Farmers can get two litters a year from their female grasscutters. And with some planning they can have a steady supply of animals to sell to their customers, providing a stable source of income that can lift families out of poverty and malnutrition.

As others get into raising grasscutters, there is the need for additional cages, providing business opportunities for woodworkers. Even after more than 10 years, the demand is such that there is room for additional farmers to undertake the raising of grasscutters.

As West Africans emigrate to other places around the globe, some farmers are beginning to envision a robust export market for the meat that they produce.

Daryll E. Ray holds the Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee, and is the Director of UT’s Agricultural Policy Analysis Center (APAC). Harwood D. Schaffer is a Research Assistant Professor at APAC. (865) 974-7407; Fax: (865) 974-7298; dray@utk.edu and hdschaffer@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.