

Farmed Reindeer – a future prospect?

Claes Rehbinder¹, Bengt Ekberg¹ & Joel Brorsson²

¹ National Veterinary Institute, S-750 07 Uppsala, Sweden

² Boda 1210, S-740 45 Tärsjö, Sweden

Rangifer, 15 (1): 39–40

Are farmed reindeer, in a traditionally agricultural environment, a realistic alternative to the extensive herding methods evolved in the traditional reindeer areas? Are farmed reindeer an economic alternative that may compete with the traditional production? Are farmed reindeer a realistic choice compared with other alternatives when changing direction in agricultural production?

This article does not intend to answer these questions. It is intended to promote a scientific interest and debate. The paper reports on a project of reindeer farming in southern Sweden. The farm owner is, until now, successfully trying to keep and breed reindeer the same way other deer, such as fallow deer and red deer are farmed. These reindeer, however, are born, raised and living in an environment considerably different from their natural habitat.

The reindeer industry is today very different from what it used to be. There has been a complete change in management methods from keeping relatively tame reindeer, in comparatively small herds, managed and herded mainly by walking or skiing, to a modern industry where «old methods» have been replaced by the management of large herds of semi-domestic reindeer using snow mobiles, motorcycles etc. In addition, a lot of herding is performed with the help of rented helicopters. Hence, modern

extensive reindeer management demands large investments. In addition, it exposes the animals to considerable stress (Rehbinder 1990). Modern extensive management, most probably due to the stress involved, often produces meat of a low quality. Among several other problems related to this kind of herding are overgrazing, predators, traffic accidents, uncontrolled outbreaks of disease etc.

The overproduction of traditional agricultural farm products has led to a conversion of the production and a search for alternatives. One such alternative is deer farming utilizing mainly fallow-deer (*Dama dama*) and red deer (*Cervus elaphus*).

On a farm near Uppsala, reindeer, in a small scale trial (6 animals), far away from their natural grazing areas, have been kept on a pasture, four hectares in size, for more than two years, fenced in by electric wire (Insulrimber®). They have stayed healthy and borne calves. The animals have received hay and commercial supplementary feed during the winter season and have, spring and autumn, been regularly dewormed with *Ivermectin pour on*. They carry a very low burden of lungworms and are free of gastrointestinal worms and Oestridae.

During summer 1994 they have been grazing successfully together with four horses. The only setbacks so far have been the loss of a calf due to trauma and that a two year old female abandoned her



Fig. 1 Thriving reindeer corralled in a typical agricultural environment of southern Sweden. The fence is made of electric wire (Insultimber®). No animals have escaped. Photo: Bengt Ekberg.

calf a short time after birth. Apparently, reindeer are capable of surviving and breeding in the southern parts of Sweden when farmed in large grazing corals. The use of an electric wire enclosure has proved successful and reduces the cost by around 50% compared to a sheep net. Hence, the cost of the surveillance and monitoring of the animals' health as well as treatments, if necessary, is low. The controlled introduction and use of supplementary feed is facilitated. The slaughter can be performed as trophy hunting for sale having the advantage, compared to fallow- and ted deer, that both sexes carry antlers. In addition, the market is close and meat not affected by management/stress induced taste deterioration is easier to market.

The major obstacle is the difficulty to foresee what problems might arise when running such an operation on a large scale. Is reindeer farming in southern Sweden really realistic? What are the ethical considerations and the economical and practical consequences of such an operation? Today nobody knows.

Reference

Rehbinder, C. 1990. Management stress in reindeer. — *Rangifer*, Special Issue No. 3: 267–288.

Manuscript accepted 2 February, 1995