RANGELAND GRAZING FOR SHEEP AND GOATS IN ICELAND

Ólafur R. Dýrmundsson Ph.D.
The Farmers Association of Iceland
Bændahöllin, 107 Reykjavík, Iceland
Tel.: +354-563-0300/0317 Fax: +354-562-3058
E-mail: ord@bondi.is Web-page: www.bondi.is

Outlines of the presentation

The Republic of Iceland, founded in 1944, an island of 103,000 km², bordering on the Arctic Circle, is better known internationally for its volcanic activity, glaciers and mountainous landscapes than for its grassland based agriculture. However, the nearly 4000 farmers of Iceland are producing high quality food to the extent that the country is almost 100% self-sufficient in meat, milk and eggs and 40% in vegetables for its population of 320,000 + 1 million tourists per annum. Moreover, there are exports of lamb, horses, horse meat, dairy products such as „skyr“, mink furs and eider-down. Although the area of cultivated land is small, mainly for silage and hay production, substantial livestock grazing is utilized on extensive rangeland pastures stretching from lowlands to steep mountain slopes. Thus both communal and privately kept natural pasture are amongst the most valuable resources of the country providing summer grazing for 1,1 million sheep and a small goat population, as well as sustaining considerable horse, cattle and reindeer grazing. The short-tailed Icelandic sheep and the Icelandic goat, both of Nordic origin, are well adapted to the traditional, extensive grazing system applied which is characterized by free-range browsing for 5-6 months (June-November) followed by housing with silage/hay feeding for 6-7 months (November-May). Thus the economic contribution of rangeland utilization is substantial, especially to the sheep sector, amounting to approximately half of the annual roughage consumption of sheep and goats. The diverse vegetation of the rangelands is characterized by hardy grasses (Gramineae) and sedges (Cyperaceae) as well as by dwarf shrub heaths and mosses. There is also a great variation, partly seasonal, in plant quality, selection, intake and nutritive value as well as in vegetation cover and soil condition. These sustainable pastures, which do not receive any fertilizers, thus have extremely variable land carrying capacity. Expressed as ewes with lambs (mainly twins) per hectare this could range from 0.4-2.0 on lowlands and 0.4-0.8 on uplands, at a moderate grazing pressure. In the Quality Controlled Sheep Production Scheme, now including 93% of the sheep production, the guidelines expressed as hectares needed per ewe with lambs, aim for 2.5-8.0 on rangelands below 400 m above sea level, assuming stocking rates which ensure light or moderate grazing pressure. Lambs and kids raised under such rangeland conditions are free from parasitic infection and are generally healthy. They grow fast, losses are minor and the meat is tender and palatable with an excellent consumer image.
Some of the losses on rangelands are due to a growing population of arctic foxes and sheep. Farmers are now urging both the state and the local authorities to strengthen predator control.

References


