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MOBILE AUCTION

Communal livestock scheme aids rural sustainability

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Rural cattle farmers gathered on a hillside outside the town of Bergville recently to initiate a new mobile auction scheme that aims to safeguard KwaZulu-Natal's sensitive grasslands and help traditional farmers to boost their incomes.

Known as Meat Naturally, the scheme offers financial and other incentives to rural communities based on the premise that well-managed livestock grazing can be compatible with conservation and restoring healthy ecosystems. By holding mobile auctions close to where the cattle are raised, communal farmers can take advantage of lower transport costs and lower auction commission rates.

In return, the farmers agree to implement better land care practices such as rotational grazing to reduce soil erosion and damage to grasslands.

Meat Naturally is a Conservation SA project that has been piloted in the Eastern Cape, partly based on a land management concept developed by livestock farmer and ecologist Allan Savory in Zimbabwe and the US.

According to a recent study by KPMG and the Small Enterprise Development Agency, commercial farmers own 8.7-million cattle and 25.4-million sheep, compared with about 4.7-million cattle and 3.4-million sheep in communal and rural areas. While almost 40% of cattle belong to emerging and communal farmers, barely 5% of their animals are sold through formal marketing channels.

Embracing the future: Buyers from the community line up to inspect the cattle at last week's Meat Naturally mobile auction near Bergville in KwaZulu-Natal. /Kirsten Oliver

WildLands Trust executive director Roelie Kloppers says: "Through a partnership with Meat Naturally, we can provide communities in the Mweni area of the Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg area with mobile cattle auctions that save them from incurring transport costs and high fees associated with traditional auctions."

Last week community members of the AmaZizi and AmaNgwane region near Bergville held the first mobile livestock auction in the area, raising over R600,000 through the sale of nearly 100 cattle.

Daniel Hlongwane, a local cattle owner and Meat Naturally environmental monitor, says he brought only one of his bulls to the sale to gauge what price he would get. "We would like to see a higher rand value per kilogramme, but I am satisfied with what I got at the auction."

Senzo Dunywa, a WildLands biodiversity stewardship facilitator, says he felt the auction went well and had a positive impact on local farmers. "They were very happy with the commission of 4% which they must pay compared to some of the auctions they are used to, which is around 8% or above.

"Although some of farmers did not sell, as they felt that the prices were lower than what they were hoping for, I'm certain that with improved land practices, the implementation of rotational grazing and community participation, the farmers will get more satisfactory prices."

Global Nature Fund board member Andrew Venter believes that rural sustainability is the key to the conservation of Africa's biodiversity. "This project demonstrates that it is possible to combine cattle farming, grassland conservation and livelihood development, a unique combination that has the potential to unlock rural landscape conservation efforts across Africa."

According to a rangeland stewardship toolkit developed by consultants Sissie Matela and Nicky McLeod in the Eastern Cape, communities are not always willing to part with their livestock, mainly for cultural reasons. They suggest that it is vital that the Meat Naturally model is developed with full participation of local land user communities, so that they can decide when the time is right for them to sell surplus livestock.

Market access: Buyers size up the livestock on sale at the mobile auction, where more than R600,000 was raised. The Meat Naturally project has been piloted in the Eastern Cape. /Kirsten Oliver

"Incentives can take the form of training, subsidised cattle inoculations, equipment, etc as well as market access through auctions, opening up value chains and accessing buyers or providing accreditation for compliance with industry standards," they propose.

While beef and dairy cattle in intensive agriculture produce higher greenhouse gas emissions than vegetables and other crops, livestock reared on natural grassland pasture can help to ensure that larger areas of wild habitat remain largely unmodified rather than being ploughed and converted to more intensive farming.