



Successful predator control by safeguarding sheep – an alternative approach

By Heather Dugmore

At a time when most sheep farmers are doubling up on shooting, trapping and poisoning in the demoralising attempt to reduce predation, Jacques Pienaar of Mega Merinos in the Colesberg district is sleeping soundly at night, reassured that in the last eighteen months he has not lost one sheep to predators.

Jacques Pienaar keeps a close count of his Merino flock. The 2012 national sheep-counting champion at 7.2 sheep a second, he knows when even one animal is missing. These days he walks away from each count smiling but it was not always so. Up until 18 months ago he was losing 150-200 sheep a year to predators on the farms Klipplaatsfontein and Hammelfontein where he runs 3000 stud ewes together with his father Andries.

The Pienaars have been farming here since 1887 and, between the two family farms, their irrigation farm and their empowerment farm, they run a total of 8000 ewes. They have a 50% share in the empowerment farm, while five of their staff members and their wives who have worked with them for many years, own the other 50%.

Jacques joined his father on their stud farm in 1992 and they have since won the South African champion Merino breeder 19 times. "In our area you won't find anything but Merino; other breeds are regarded as the antichrist!" he laughs, adding that they have been blessed with their sheep.

"But, like most sheep farmers we were really having a problem with predators, and it doesn't help that we have a 40 000 hectare game reserve right next door to our farm," Jacques explains. "I was spending a hang of a lot of time and money on traps, cages, night shoots and trying to secure 70 kilometres of fencing. But it was unsuccessful and the jackals and rooikatte (caracals) kept coming in."

He knew he had to try something different, which he did. "It's been unbelievably successful. Fortunately my farm is fairly flat, and it is easier to implement my alternative predator control methods in this kind of terrain. The more rugged the terrain the more difficult it is. I certainly don't have all the answers and I am learning all the time, but for those whom it can offer some help I want to share my methods because the jackals and rooikatte are busy destroying the farmers' profits."

1. Ewes in lamb are protected in well-secured, jackal-proof and electric-fenced camps

I have 10 camps of 200Ha secured with 0.9m high jackal-proof fencing, with three barbed wire strands on top, making it 1.4m high. Three-strand electric fencing is positioned on the outside of the jackal-proof fence: the first strand is live and is 10cm from the ground, the second is 10cm above this and it is an earth wire, and the third strand is 10cm above this and is live – these stop animals from trying to dig under the fence. A fourth live strand is at the top of the 1.4m fence to stop animals from

attempting to jump over. I use 2.24mm *staaldraad* (steel wire) and an M-63R energiser, which can electrify approximately 20km of fencing. The gates are also electrified and any drifts or *sloots* are sealed off with concrete blocks to prevent access. The vegetation under the electric fence is cleared and sprayed with a steriliser – I use Bundu and Format – which prevents vegetation re-growth for at least three years. It cost me R100 000 to electrify 20kms, material and labour included. The fences are checked twice a week while the ewes are in these camps to ensure they are intact and that the power is working. The secret of success here is the frequent maintenance and management of the fences. I move the ewes into these camps two weeks before they are due to lamb – they are artificially inseminated so I know exactly when they are going to lamb – and they stay here until the lambs are weaned at three months. I have two lambing seasons per year – March/April and September/October with 1500 ewes lambing per season, 150 in each of the 10 camps. I was initially skeptical about whether electric fencing would work but the results have convinced me. I haven't lost any ewes or lambs since installing this system over a year ago. The break between lambing seasons also gives the veld an opportunity to rest.



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Jacques (left) and his father Andries Pienaar inspect the jackal-proof and electric-fenced camps where the ewes in lamb are protected in 10 camps of 200Ha, 150 ewes per camp, until the lambs are three months old.

2. Weaner lambs from 3-12 months are kraaled every evening

At 4pm every afternoon the weaner lambs are kraaled in groups of 200 until 7am the following morning. This gives them nine hours of grazing during the day and by the time they come in for the night they have eaten their fill. My staff members use horses, motorbikes or the bakkie to bring them in, but the weaners get so accustomed to the system that they are usually waiting at the kraal gate at 4pm. I do not put food or water in the kraal overnight. This system also gives me the opportunity to count them daily and to check their condition. This way any sick animals are quickly detected and treated, preventing losses here too. Each kraal is 15x20m in size and fenced with 3m high jackal-proof fencing - like a tennis court. For ease of management the kraals are situated in the centre of four of our best veld camps where the weaners graze during the day. Male and female weaners are kept apart (because the males spend too much time chasing the females, and then they don't pick up condition) and the kraals are cleaned out every two months. People warned me that the jackals would start preying on my weaners during the day, but in eighteen months of doing this, so far I haven't lost any weaners, day or night, despite the fact that the veld camps are alongside the game reserve.



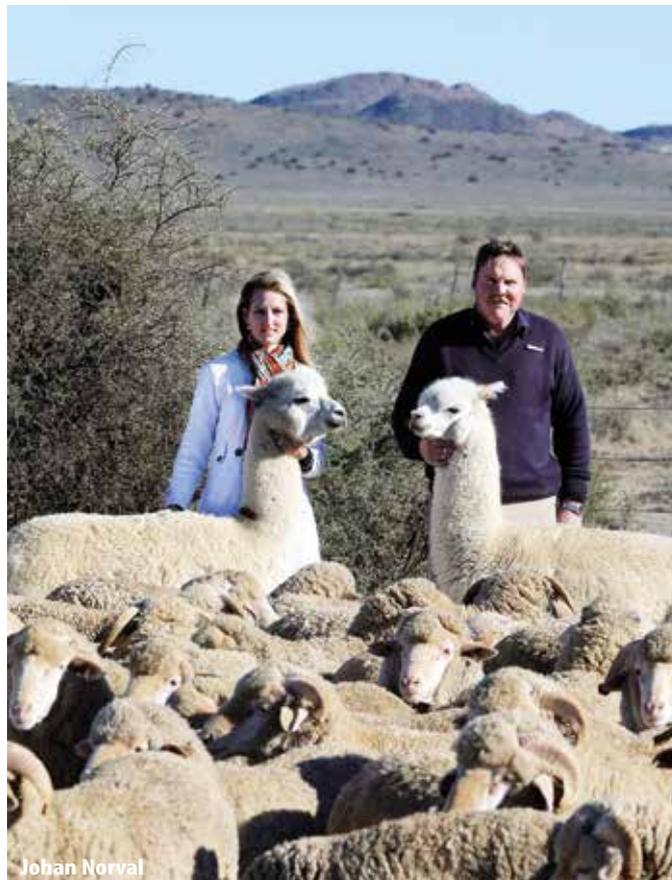
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At 4pm every afternoon the weaner lambs from 3-12 months are kraaled in groups of 200 in 15x20m camps until 7am the following morning. The camps, such as the one pictured on the left, resemble tennis courts – with 3m high jackal proof fencing.

3. Maiden ewes have alpacas to guard them

In countries like Australia, alpacas have successfully been used as guard animals for livestock for a long time. In South Africa they are not as well-known but when I heard about them, I decided, with some skepticism, to try them out. I bought some from Sally Kingwill who breeds them near Graaff-Reinet. I put two male alpacas with each group of 250 of my 12-month-old maiden ewes in the veld camps. I kraal them with the alpacas for the first week to get them used to each other and then they are left out in the veld where the alpacas

protect them. The alpacas are gentle towards us but they are instinctively aggressive towards predators. I can't even allow my dogs close to them – the alpacas go for them. After six months of using alpacas with my maiden ewes I haven't lost any to predators, and they are in camps of 200Ha where I previously suffered great losses. I am amazed at the results.



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Jacques and Engela Pienaar with two of the alpacas they use as guard animals – they are instinctively aggressive towards predators.

4. Warding off the two-legged jackals

We believe a good relationship with your staff and treating them well goes a long way to warding off the two-legged jackals. Most of our staff members are part of the Ramayisa family and have worked with us for many years. Our stud manager Jack Ramayisa has been with us for 39 years and he, my father and I are amongst the few people who have been invited to Australia to judge sheep. We look after our people and offer them opportunities for advancement, and they look after us. We make a strong team and we have no stock theft.

"With these methods I'll be saving thousands of rands in the long-term. I also don't have to explain away my losses, because, as my grandfather always said: At the end of the day only results count, not excuses," says Jacques who is furiously practising for the 2013 South African sheep-counting championships. If things continue to go as well as they have for him with his alternative predator control methods, he won't be counting his losses, only his gains.

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