U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Office of Information
Press Service

Release - Immediate.

October 7, 1929.

HUMANE ASPECTS IN FOX FARMING

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(Address given at meeting of the American Humane Association, at St. Louis, Mo., September 30, 1929)

When the first wire inclosure was erected to hold a pair of silver foxes in captivity, few persons had any conception of the important factors involved in feeding, breeding, and managing fur animals on farms. The "hit-and-miss" methods of management that were termed "the tricks of the trade" in the old days are now matters of history. Much safer and saner methods are now in use, and the business of fur farming is a recognized part of our agricultural industry. For instance, successful fox farmers now do not feed foxes by throwing handfuls of meat or fish over the fence to the animals. Water dishes are not allowed to stand for weeks at a time until green mould has collected in them, or until the foxes have contaminated the dishes with feces. Pens, dens, and nest boxes are no longer receptacles for manure, or storage houses for the bones and other debris that foxes choose to carry in. Small double pens with single wire partitions through which a fox could reach and pull the leg or tail off its neighbor are now passe. A lot has been learned about the control of diseases and parasites. This is by no means the nightmare that it once was.

Crushing the life out of a fox by placing the foot on his chest, or striking him on the base of the skull with a club, are no longer the common practices of killing foxes. If for no other reason than economy it is unwise to use any form of violence in killing the animal, for its pelt.

Skins of animals slaughtered by a blow or shot with a rifle are damaged and will not bring full price.

The best results are obtained by the action of some form of lethal agent that will cause prompt loss of consciousness. Carbon tetrachloride, chloroform, or ether will produce the results desired. Carbon tetrachloride is preferable because it is cheap and easily obtainable. A small dose of this liquid is injected into the nasal passage of a fox by means of a syringe and the fox dies in a few seconds.

At first, foxes were treated as scavengers and were compelled to eat refuse and decomposed material and to live in filthy surroundings. This was believed by some to be absolutely necessary, as it represented conditions to which the fox was accustomed in the wild. Never having studied the fox in its natural habitat, a large number of pioneers in the industry held this idea for several years.

Experiments have demonstrated in every line of animal production that good breeding is ineffective unless the feeding is such that the animals will thrive and yield a good increase. This is also true of fox farming. Only food that is clean and wholesome should be supplied. Polluted or diseased material should never be given. To obtain the best results from feeding, a ration must be provided that is both palatable and acceptable.

These changes that have evolved in the thirty years in which this industry has developed have been rapid and revolutionary. They have not only improved the environment of the foxes but have done much to improve the quality of the fur produced.

It is being demonstrated constantly that the natural supply of furs can be supplemented by raising fur animals under the care and protection of man. There are approximately 5,000 fur farmers in the United States and Alaska and the investment is between $20,000,000 and $25,000,000. This does not include the vast areas of muskrat marshes in the country, many of which also are operated privately or by the State as fur farms.

Mink, muskrat, and rabbit raising has developed more rapidly in the last year than have any other branches of fur farming. Persons raising minks have had no difficulty in contracting for the sale of young at $250 to $350 a pair in the fall prior to their birth in the spring.

Muskrat ranch owners in the East have shipped large numbers of live muskrats to the Pacific Coast States and to European countries for restocking marsh areas.

Rabbit raising is no longer a pet-stock proposition. It has become an agricultural business that is now assuming large proportions in various sections of the United States, especially in the Pacific Coast States, the Middle West, and South.

The chief purpose of the work of the fur resources branch of the Department of Agriculture is to conduct experiments and other necessary research in fur farming. Facts are being gathered on all phases of production for the benefit of the growing numbers of fur farmers throughout the country. The results of the investigations are given to the public through demonstrations, individual advice, and bulletins and circulars.

Through investigations at the Fur-Animal Experiment Station at Saratoga Springs, N. Y., the Rabbit Experiment Station, at Fontana, Calif., and the work in fur-animal diseases being done in cooperation with the Medical School of the University of Minnesota, valuable information is being developed regarding all species of fur bearers now being propagated on farms in the country. Their habits are observed here and elsewhere, and investigations are made of the best management practices regarding feeding, breeding, and housing captive animals, and prevention or control of the diseases and parasites to which they are subject when concentrated in numbers greater than are ordinarily found in small areas in the wild.

The experiment stations of the Biological Survey are open to the public, and many visitors from all parts of the United States, Canada, and European countries have already inspected them and noted the experiments in progress.

An invitation is extended to all those who desire to obtain first-hand information on fur-farming to visit these experiment stations. The directors in charge are always willing and anxious to explain to the general public the work the Government is doing to determine the best methods of producing fur animals in captivity.

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