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GUINEA PIG (*Cavia porcellus*) A FORGOTTEN SOURCE OF PROTEIN: POTENTIALS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES.

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Introduction

That there is a protein challenge facing the Nigerian population is no longer news. It is on record that Nigerians are among the least consumers of animal protein in Africa (Egbunike, 1997.) consuming less than 67g of protein as recommended by the World Health Organisation (Akintola et al, 1999). It is evident also that this deficit most probably come about because the bigger and more conventional livestock species (cattle, sheep, goat and poultry) have not been able to meet expectation of the main suppliers of animal origin. There is high and increasing demand for animal and animal products in the country principally because of increase in population as well as awareness of the role of animals in bridging the protein divide. This situation calls for increase rearing of animals that would cushion this rapid and increasing demand for animals and their products. Exploiting and engaging in the keeping of the so called unconventional or micro livestock becomes necessary and handy in this circumstance.

The guinea pig (*cavia porcellus*) is an animal indigenous to the South American Andes especially Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia (Morales, 1995) but which is well adapted to the Nigerian ecosystem. The production of this animal can be integrated effectively into rural economy because of its short gestation period (68-72 days), low cost of production, need for limited space, early maturity and ease of management. The common culturable guinea pigs is a domesticated descendent of a closely related species of *cavia* such as *Cavia asperca*, *C. fulgida* and *C. tschudii* and do not naturally exist in the wild. It measures on the average between 20-40cm from head to rump; they do not have tail (Nowak, 1999). It has four toes on each front paw and three toes on each hind paw (Alderton, 1999). Adult guinea pigs usually weigh between 500-1500g but the National Agrarian Research Institute of Peru has developed a "super cuy" that weighs up to 3kg (Nowak, 1999; Economist, 2004). Females weigh less than males.

Guinea pig, if well fed reach, reach reproductive age very quickly, that is at 2weeks. Females can start reproductive activity at the age of 3months or when they reach 60% of their adult body weight. Males mature a bit later (at months). For optimum result,

sustained production and not to have weak offspring however, females should be at least 3-4 months and males 5-7 months of age before breeding is initiated. The guinea pig has a production life span of 6-8 years.

Potentials

The following advantages are derivable from guinea pig farming:-

- It is considered a very promising micro livestock species for rural development because it requires little capital and equipment. Guinea pigs farming do not require expensive equipment to begin. So it is relatively easy to start a small profitably guinea pig business.
- Guinea pig farming is not labour intensive and due to their docile nature, can easily be managed by women and children.
- Due to limited space in urban environments and limited space requirements, they can relatively easily be produced in urban areas.
- Guinea pig has the potential for high return on Investment (ROI) with low level of input. A well fed guinea pig can reach its reproductive age at 12 weeks, females give birth 5-6 times/year with a litter sized of 5-7 guinea pig pups. Under very high intensive management, 7-8 births/year is achievable.
- With adequate feeding and management, guinea pigs can be kept by farmers in many parts of the country.
- The consumption of its meat has no taboo (religious or otherwise) attached to it.
- The meat is high in protein, low in fat and cholesterol making it perfect in an increasingly health conscious and mobile population.
- It has a high dressing percentage (about 65%).

Acceptability and Demand for its Meat.

The main product of the guinea pig is its meat. The meat is used as an important source of protein given that it is a product of excellent quality, high biological value, high in protein (20.3%) and low fat (8%) compared to other meat (Numbela and Valencia, 2003). The meat is described as being similar to rabbit and the dark meat of chicken (Vecchio, 2004; Mutchell, 2006). Also more than 65% of the meat is edible which include skin, heart, kidney and liver. The

meat is not linked to... (religious and cultural). The meat is quite acceptable and is increasingly becoming a source of easily available protein in parts of the country where it is reared. Most people who do not consume it associated it with the rat probably because of its small size. Its size is actually advantageous since it can be eaten with little or no wastage. The meat can be eaten cooked, fried or baked and served with variety of food.

Challenges.

The major challenges to profitable guinea pig production in Nigeria are:

- ❖ Availability of quality feed:- The guinea pig is a herbivore with a large capacity for forage consumption. It can also be given concentrate feed. Combining forage with concentrate is also good for the animal. The challenge is in the production of quality feed mostly concentrate to meet the nutrient requirement of the animal. Commercial feed millers can be encourage in this regard to consider looking into this area of production particularly now that interest seem to be on the increase in the exploitation of the animal as a source of protein. Such feed need to be of high quality, digestible, readily available and at affordable price.
- ❖ Diseases and Pests: - This is a great challenge for prospective guinea pig farmers. The animal is basseted with a plethora of diseases/pests that affects it which can easily lead to reduced productivity. Some of the diseases affecting guinea pigs are: - *Salmonellosis*, *Bordetella pneumonia*, *Streptococcal pneumonia*, antibiotics induced enerotonemia haemorrhagic typhlitis, cervical lymphadenitis, pod dermatitis (bumble foot), mastitis dermatophytosis, tyzzles diseases, Coccidiosis and scurvy. It is also affected by external parasites such as flies, mites, lice, mange and bedbugs; internal parasites such as nematodes and fasciola hepatica. The challenge is to know how to prevent, treat or cure such diseases /pests infestation. Adequate feeding and sound sanitation could be of help while veterinarians can assist farmers through education and enlightenment campaigns.
- ❖ Another problem is the problem of heat especially in the northern part of the country. Due to its stout, compact conformation, the animal more easily tolerates excessive cold than excessive heat (Wagner and manning, 1976). Guinea pig normal body temperature is 38.5-40°C (Terri and Clemons, 1998) and its ideals

ambient air temperature is similar to that of humans, that is 18-24°C (Wagner and manning, 1976). Consistent ambient temperature in excess of 32°C have been linked to hyperthermia and death especially in pregnant sows (Wagner and manning, 1976). Extreme of humidity outside the range of 30-70% is also not suited to the guinea pig. The maintenance of ideal temperature and humidity in the farm is therefore of paramount importance for good production. (Wagner and manning 1976, Terri and Clemons, 1998).

- ❖ Obtaining correct breeds/species of pups and reproductive that are fast growing and can attain market weights early is also a challenge. Most if not all the guinea pigs currently reared in the country are mixed parentage and hence of no pedigree. This is a great challenge for animal breeders. There is the need to pursue this aspect in order to create breeds that can be more tolerant to the hotter parts of the country, that are disease /pest resistant and at the same time highly productive.

Conclusion

To meet or bridge the protein deficit, guinea pigs farming if properly harnessed can help in no small measure. Apart from income generation to farmers within the shortest possible time due to the short generation interval of the animal, protein intake will be greatly enhanced especially for the poor.

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