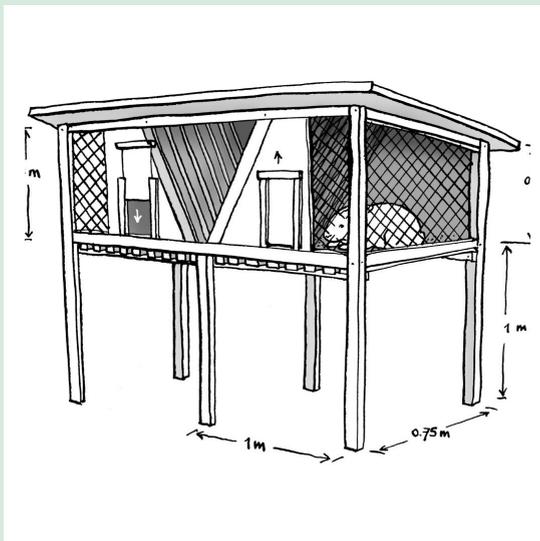
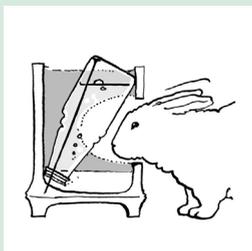
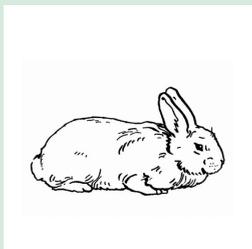


Backyard rabbit keeping in the tropics



Agrodok 20

**Back-yard rabbit keeping
in the tropics**

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C.J. Corstiaensen

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Foreword

While living in Indonesia many years ago, my wife and I wanted to become involved in some kind of animal husbandry, but our back-yard was too small to house large animals like goats or sheep, let alone cows. For this reason, we chose to raise rabbits. One of the results of that choice was the publication in 1983 of an Agrodok on the practical aspects of back-yard rabbit raising. Now, 25 years later, I am pleased to write the foreword to the 5th, revised, edition of this frequently ordered Agrodok.

Thousands of copies have already been distributed of the original publication in English, Spanish, French, Nepalese, Sinhala and Tamil. So I do hope this booklet has helped bring some added benefit to families around the world (whether in the form of income, food or fun). This new edition will be co-published and distributed by CTA. Hopefully the practical information provided in it will reach the target group everywhere in the world where keeping rabbits is possible.

The content of this Agrodok has remained basically unchanged, but its readability, illustrations and layout have been greatly improved. The information in the annexes Further reading and Useful addresses have of course been updated, since websites did not yet exist in 1983!

I thank Kees Corstiaensen, who revised the text for this version and included his practical experiences with rabbits in many parts of the world, and Olivier Rijcken, who improved the illustrations.

Hans Schiere (www.laventana.nl)
September 2008; Manilla, the Philippines

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1 Introduction

People keep rabbits for many different reasons. The main aim of this booklet is to give some reasons for small farmers, low-income families or children to do so, and to discuss management, housing, breeding, nutrition, veterinary issues, and other potential problems for this type of back-yard farming.

1.1 Some reasons for keeping rabbits

- The meat is tasty, of good quality, low in fat content and similar to chicken meat. This is known in many rural, tropical communities.
- There are few religious or other taboos regarding rabbit meat. Islam does not prohibit eating rabbit meat, for example.
- Initial capital outlay is minimal. With some scrap wood or bamboo, a hutch can be constructed.
- To start a rabbit ‘business’ one does not need a large initial investment. A few does (females) with a buck or ram (male) is enough to start. Once the kindling begins, the herd rapidly increases in size (if managed well and with no bad luck) so that very soon one can slaughter the young males.
- If one starts a rabbit ‘business’ with borrowed animals, within half a year the initial ‘credit’ can be returned as live animals.
- Animals all over the tropical world are often used as a type of savings account. When a small amount of money is needed, it is easier to sell a small animal than for example the hind leg of a goat.
- The quantity of meat provided by a rabbit is enough for a small party or a family dish (the amount of meat per rabbit is comparable to that of a chicken). On the other hand, a rabbit is small enough that a family can eat all the meat at once without the need for refrigeration or other conservation.
- Because the does produce offspring regularly, they provide a regular source of income instead of a large amount all at once.
- Feeding rabbits can be very cheap. Even though supplementation with concentrate or grain is sometimes necessary and definitely will

increase growth rates, roadside grass, kitchen waste (if it does not contain animal products), garden leaves, etc., can provide the main feed at almost no cost.

- Rabbits can be tended by women, children or men; and unlike with bigger animals, force is not needed to restrain them.
- The manure can be used for vegetable growing.
- The manure does not have a very strong smell, and rabbits do not make much noise, so neighbours will not likely complain.
- The skin is valuable if there is a market for it, possibly for local handicrafts (see Chapter 10 for tanning).
- Children learn to tend for and appreciate animals.
- A rabbit is a nice present for a child on a birthday, for a neighbour planning to marry or for a servant who plans to go home to his village.

No doubt this long list could be extended to include many more reasons for keeping rabbits.

Some difficulties in keeping rabbits

- Most importantly, people who have never kept rabbits before are often reluctant to start because it is difficult to accept something new. Whereas in Europe and the United States there is a well-established market for rabbit meat, in the tropics the market is more focused on chickens. There are few countries with an existing market for rabbit meat. This reduces potential monetary income, but it should be no problem if the intention is to raise rabbits as a family enterprise, mainly to provide meat for the family where the diet may be lacking in protein.
- Diseases are common and, unlike for chickens, specific rabbit medicines are not easily available. Moreover, veterinarians (even in Europe and the USA) do not usually have much experience in the diagnosis and treatment of rabbit diseases. On the other hand, with good hygiene and common sense, in addition to the information found in this booklet, one should not have too many worries about diseases. Most animals get sick once in a while, and a dead rabbit is less of a worry than a dead goat or cow.

- Keeping rabbits will certainly take up some of your time for feeding, cleaning, managing and keeping records. It is difficult to say how much time is needed. This will depend on the number of animals you keep, the housing system you choose and the way you are able to obtain feed. As a general rule, keeping 5 to 10 rabbits will occupy you about 1 to 2 hours a day for cleaning, managing and feeding.

1.2 General husbandry and handling

Like all animals, rabbits require proper care if they are to (re)produce well. Before going to sleep at night one should check them, and during the day one should keep a close eye on them. It is not enough to see whether the animal is sick, one should learn to recognise whether the animal is likely to become sick. Likewise, it is not enough to see that the doe has made a nest and kindled, one should know beforehand that she will soon make a nest and kindle.

Give your young rabbits the best food and drinking water possible (Chapter 7). Remove dung and clean the hutches weekly with water. If you are careful, it will not be necessary to take the animals out. Always handle the rabbits in the proper way. Lift them as shown in Figure 1.

Those animals you want to use for further breeding should be given identification (Chapter 9). Keep a close watch on their performance; do not kill the fast growers but use those for further upgrading your stock. Separate the males and females that you want to keep early on, before they become sexually active (females at four months, males two months later).

If you want to sell the rabbits as reproduction animals, separate the males from the females before they become sexually active. This is not necessary for broiler rabbits, since they will be slaughtered before becoming mature. It is better not to put several litters together in one hutch, in order to prevent fighting. After mating the first time, you

should give the young doe an individual hutch before kindling. The whole cycle then starts again.



Figure 1: Handling rabbits. A. Holding a young rabbit. B. Holding by loose skin of shoulder while supporting hind part. C. Carrying a rabbit with its head covered by your arm, and with one hand free. D. Checking rabbit's belly with right hand free.

1.3 Structure of this Agrodok

There are many aspects to general rabbit husbandry. In this booklet we describe the most important things you need to know to start keeping rabbits: the different breeds, how to select breeding stock, mating and kindling, rearing the young, housing, feeding, illnesses, good administration practices, slaughtering and tanning the skin.

In the appendices you will find additional information, including a glossary of technical terms used, more detailed information on feed and diseases as well as a list of useful books.