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Die Boekwurm

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Overcoming the grazing barrier

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Lots of grass but little veld. After the first rains we are at a time of year where there is a lot of grass, but the cattle only use the tasty and softer grass and avoid the unpalatable and drier grass in the pasture. In general, manure is soft and watery and the cattle's frame does not fill properly due to poor intake of harder fiber. Even for the advanced farmer who has mastered high-pressure grazing, the intake of harder fiber remains a challenge. There is food but the way the animals utilize it is ineffective and there is still not proper progress. We all deal with this "grazing barrier" and we ask ourselves the question - where are we missing it and what can we do to overcome this obstacle.

Most farmers manage their animals in a way that prevents them from drinking water that has come into contact with the ground. I spoke to a high-pressure grazing farmer near Delmas who shared an interesting observation with me. His cattle usually drink from earthen dams that are fed by a stream. When he puts them in pens where they have to drink clean water from a trough, it seems as if the cattle get an electric shock when they touch the water. His cattle regularly break out of these pens to go back and drink from the earthen dams.

A big question for high-pressure grazing farmers - Why does the high-pressure grazing principle work for the wildebeest on the Masai Mara without any "grazing barrier", but when farmers want to apply it to their farms, we get stuck. The only difference is that the wildebeest drink water from rivers and pans where they get the soil organisms along with the water. Access to natural soil microbes seems trivial and small, but as long as it is overlooked, the "barrier" will always be with us.

What does nature teach us from this situation? Along with all the components in a lick, cattle need certain organisms from the soil to ensure optimal rumen function. Some of these organisms include anaerobic rumen fungi that are responsible for the breakdown and digestion of cellulose and hemicellulose in grass fiber.

Vermate is a product that is composed of soil microbes and trace elements to address this gap in the food chain.

A further problem created by the "grazing barrier" is that veld that is not grazed cleanly is hindered from regrowing. The build-up of dry material means that the pasture later becomes "woolly" and the only option left is to burn the old material so that new growth can take place. What would be the implication if we could effectively utilise this huge source of unused nutrition and allow the veld to recover better? We tackled exactly this challenge together with Frikkie Weber at Senekal. Frikkie applies ultra high pressure grazing for the

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past eight years. The build-up of hard fibre is visible in his pasture. With the inclusion of Vermate in his lick since July, we have observed a drastic improvement in the intake of hard fibre in the pasture. The accompanying photo was taken on the 5th of November. The block on the right was grazed two weeks before the photo and the one on the left four days before the photo. The ratio in which the cattle eat material, trample some and loose some has improved drastically. The block on the right shows the regrowth after a light rain shower. The recovery of the feed bank after grazing and the quality of the material with which Frikkie enters the winter is simply incredible! The soil under the thick mat of dry material that covers the ground is wonderfully moist and soft. The grass's energy reserves that have been built up in the root system over eight years make it possible to restore the pasture within two weeks after grazing. The grass is well grazed and trampled but not so that the growing points are damaged.

This also contributes to the rapid recovery.



What is the difference if animals use fiber better? Well, fiber intake determines everything! It determines the condition, growth and fertility of animals. It determines how quickly your feed bank recovers after grazing. It determines the quality of the feed bank for the animals with the next grazing cycle. It also determines how peacefully you will sleep when the next drought rears its head. The opportunity that better fiber intake presents that I am most excited about is the fact that farmers who want to switch from conventional grazing to high-pressure grazing can now do so much more easily. **VeN**

Wilhelm Joubert grew up as a farmer in the Hoedspruit area where his father farmed commercial Afrikaner cattle. As a boy, he intensely observed the cattle's behavior in the veld and noticed a gap in the role of microbes in animal nutrition. With his further studies as a microbiologist, this gap became increasingly clear and he developed the Vermate product to address this need. Today, the results speak for themselves!