

THE USE OF CARABAO AS A DRAFT ANIMAL IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Of all work farm animals the carabao is the main and the most important type of animal in a Filipino farmer's farmstead. Without these work animals the farm operations would be practically at a standstill. This is very true during the six months' dry season when the soil is very hard and is too hard to be worked by ordinary human labour. Also during the wet and flood periods it is impractical to use machinery on the flooded paddies. Most farmers involved in lowland rice culture use the carabao to do all the work although in some cases oxen and bullocks are trained to do the farm operations. The carabao is better suited to muddy conditions and can work effectively whether in rainy or muddy conditions. Although a few of the big-time farmers do use tractors, most still use animals. As I saw it the importance and the popularity of the animals is still going to be maintained for many more years to come, even though modern machinery and tools may be used or introduced. The carabao will still be the closest ally of the rice planter due to its initial cheap cost and cheap maintenance.

Most farmers own at least two to three carabaos for work. They can then change them around when one of the animals tires.

The carabao is the tamest livestock on the farm and is easy to breed by natural or artificial means. Breeding naturally is the most common and the oldest method. The carabao is a hard-working animal and can stand up to very difficult conditions.

The amount of rice produced in the Philippines to feed the large population can be credited both to the availability of expert technical knowledge and the use of work animals. Even though the country is advanced in many ways the importance of the work animals is still nationally recognized and cannot be questioned. In many cases the use of modern machinery would be impractical. This is based on the fact that most farmers own very small pieces of land and it would be a waste of money if they purchased expensive machinery. Also machinery is expensive to maintain and most simple farmers cannot afford the cost.



Carabao being used to cultivate a rice paddy.

Types of carabao

There are two types of carabaos that can be found. They are the dairy or milk type, and the draft or meat type.

In this report I will only discuss the latter category. As the name implies, this type of animal is used for both meat and work purposes. The animal is raised mainly for work purposes and meat is only a secondary purpose. The animal is sold for meat at an old age or if it is not fit for work. A young and good-looking animal may also be sold for meat purposes, if in the opinion of the farmer, it is not intelligent or intractable and is not going to turn into a good work animal.

The meat of an old animal, especially one that has gone through a lot of hard work, is very tough and is said to have a strong flavour. It is only eaten by people who are used to this kind of meat, and who prefer the characteristic strong flavour of the meat. With good cooking the meat is more palatable and tastier. Meat of the young animal is tender and tasty, and is not much different to beef.

Carabao = swamp buffalo. In the Philippines the word is used for any type of water buffalo.

Most young and good-looking animals are looked after and trained for work purposes. This type of animal serves the farmer for a long time.

Selection of work animals

Since the carabao and other work animals are very important and the whole farm operation is mainly dependent on the animals, the farmer must select and train his animals carefully so that he will get the maximum benefit out of his animal. The ability to select and train an animal is the result of many years of experience. It is more of a traditional culture that is handed down from father to son. To be able to select a good work animal, the farmer looks for and tries to develop certain characteristics in the animals. Briefly discussed are a few of the characteristics.

Firstly comes the size. The size of an animal intended for work is very important. For a working carabao to do its work effectively, it has to be well built. There should be plenty of weight and good strong legs so that it will be able to stabilize itself when pulling the plough or any other load. In ploughing a heavy animal can offset any resistance offered by the soil more readily than a light animal. The larger animal tends to pull steadily and balance itself well due to its bigger and stronger muscles. There is also the advantage that the animal could be sold for meat later and the larger animal would have more carcass.



Filipino farmer with carabao and plough. Note mouthpiece to prevent the animal from chewing the young plants.

Apart from weight it should have a good height. A well-built tall animal covers more distance quickly than a short fat one. A good work animal should measure about 500 to 550 kilograms and about 120 centimetres from the ground.

A good fast-moving animal is more desirable than a slower one; that is if it can keep its pace without tiring. An animal which may on the one hand be slow but does its work more surely and accomplishes more work is more valuable to the farmer than one that does not work properly. A fast-moving overgrown animal may tire easily and stop after a while.

Another thing is intelligence. An intelligent animal that follows the command of its master and responds quickly is a valuable asset.

The true ability of an animal lies in how much work it can accomplish in a day. A hard-working animal should plough a relatively large area of field in one day

Breeding

Most farmers breed their own animals. The carabao cows are important in this respect, as they can be used both for work and for breeding, and can later be sold for meat purposes at old age.

Carabaos start breeding at the age of two and a half to three years. Cows produce a calf every year or every one and a half years.

In most farms farmers generally keep only a few animals and any extra may be sold. During the rice planting season the price of work animals is high. As mentioned most simple farmers breed their own working animals but others may prefer to buy from selected breeders. It is usual to find a couple of males and a female or a couple of females and a male in any average farm.

Nursing

After a calf is born it stays with its mother for about a year, deriving most of its nourishment from her milk. At this period frequent handling of the young animal by its owners makes it into a gentle animal and makes it easier to handle later on. At about a year old it may be trained to lead or may be walked around so that it may get used to the command of its owners and go in whichever direction it may be required to lead. Great care is taken at this stage so as not to scare the animal or stampede it.

Weaning

The young carabao are weaned at the age of about a year old. Weaning is a gradual thing and it may take a fair amount of time to fully separate the young animal from its mother. In large farms weanlings may be herded together until about when they are two to two and a half years old. At this age males and females are separated to prevent unnecessary or poor breeding. Separation is done by use of strong ropes that are tied around the curved horns and tied to something firm. Weanlings are kept near the farmer's house and usually children take care of them so that they do not wander.

Training of young work animals

Training begins at a very young age. The earliest training comes in the form of practical farm or field experience. When the mother is used for work the calf walks behind or at the side, and at the same time getting used to the nearness of human beings.

The real training of young animals for work begins at the age of two to two and a half years. The animals are five to six years of age before they are fully trained. At the early age of about two years they are taught first to be driven. They are then trained to be ridden. A simple load on the back may teach the animal to get used to having a load on its back. Then the next step is to teach the animal to pull a light shaft and to pull a light harrow over a field. This may take quite some time and only when the animal is used to this equipment and at the same time relatively quiet, is it taught to pull a plough.

The frequent handling of the animal at a young age makes the animal gentle and easier to handle. Since most young animals grow up in close association with the farmer and household, it makes the task easier. This plus the natural ability of a Filipino farmer as an expert animal trainer results in the production of a good draft animal.

Farmer-animal relationship and management of work animals

The farmer-work animal relationship is a very close one. Work animals are well regarded and handled with utmost care. Usually young children or especially young boys look after the pasturing of animals. It is common to see a boy of about ten or even six riding on work animals to and back from the fields. In this way both young animals and young farm children get acquainted with each



Brahman-cross steer used for ploughing.

other. This prepares both for field tasks when they reach working age, about 5 to 6 for the animal and 14 to 16 years for the boy.

In average farms, work animals are taken out to work in the field early in the morning and as the sun gets hotter they are taken back to the house, scrubbed or washed down with cold water, given fresh water to drink and then allowed to rest under shade. Where there is a freshwater pool available, they may get a good swim and have a rest in the water. Either green feed or dried rice stalk in the form of hay is fed to the animals. During the afternoon when it is cool work begins again until about 5 or 6 pm in the afternoon.

During the rainy season when there is plenty of green feed available, ploughs and harrows are removed from the animal after a hard work period and it is let loose to wander around and feed with a long rope attached to the horns. During the cool afternoons they are taken back to work. When one tires a fresh one is brought in to take its place. Farm animals are never pushed beyond their limit as far as work is concerned.

After work they are well fed and watered before they rest. They are kept very close to the farmer's house for security and other reasons.

Work animal versus farm machinery

Briefly discussed are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the work animal compared to farm machinery.

Advantages

The initial price of a carabao or bullock is much lower than a farm tractor and most farmers can afford to buy one.

The value of the young work animal increases as it grows older and becomes more experienced whereas in the case of farm machinery it decreases as it is used for a few years.

The animal is able to plough muddy or wet fields which is mostly impossible to do with farm machines and also human labour.

It certainly does a lot more work and works much faster than ordinary human labour and is also a lot cheaper.

The animal is much cheaper to maintain than machinery.

Unlike farm machinery the farmer can easily replace a work animal when one breaks down or is too old, since he is able to breed the animal on the farm.

There is less chance of breakdown with farm animals and they also do not require spare parts as in farm machinery.

The animal can effectively work a small paddy without interfering with other people's fields, and it does not require much room to turn.

Disadvantages

A work animal is much slower and covers a smaller area in a day than farm machinery.

Unlike a machine you can't just add more fuel and keep going. The animal has to be rested when it tires.

It requires skill and experience to handle the animal, as well as machinery.

All in all the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Conclusions and recommendations

The use of carabao and other related animals for work purposes is part of the old cultural practices handed down from father to son in the Philippines. Work animals are so much involved in day to day activities that they are a common sight in any farmstead. The animals could be compared to our traditional pigs but here they serve a more useful purpose than pigs. In simple definition carabao and other related animals are "the simple farmer's tractor and poor man's source of meat and milk". The importance of work animals cannot be questioned and will remain for years to come.

Here in Papua New Guinea manpower has been the main source of work force for agriculture and it will be for many years to come. Papua New Guinea being a young and backward country most people cannot afford to use expensive machinery to substitute for manpower in farming. But there is a good possibility that animal power could be used for work. We do have a lot of cattle widely spread throughout the country and it does not require a great deal of technical knowhow to teach and maintain work animals. There are a few places that have tried using animals for work in PNG and the results have been satisfactory. The possibility of using animals for work should be considered carefully because it could have a very important effect on the future of this country agriculturally.

Machinery is expensive but most people could afford work animals. The equipment to be used with work animals could be easily made from locally available materials. There would be the advantage to the simple farmer that he would not have the complicated servicing that is necessary with agricultural machinery.

Therefore the use of work animals should be a possibility that we should try to look into and possibly introduce for the good of our young nation.