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Peri-Urban Cattle Production System and Herders' Feeding Strategies in the Coastal Area of Southern Benin

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Abstract

Despite the increased urbanisation and the obvious shrinking of the forages resources around the major coastal cities in southern Benin, cattle farming still represents an important activity for many urban dwellers. The objective of the current study was to examine this production system with emphasis on the feeding practices and herders' adaptation strategies to cope with the changing urban/peri-urban environment. Forty-five (45) cattle farms located in the coastal belt of the cities of Abomey-Calavi and Ouidah were rapidly surveyed in October 2011 with a questionnaire designed to address the ownership of the herd, its size and breed composition, and management practices. Based on their willingness to cooperate, fifteen (15) herdsman were then selected for more detailed interviews on their feeding strategies. Almost half (48%) of the herds had multiple owners who were wealthy public servants or rich merchants living in the city. The animals served as wealth accumulation and were entrusted to hired herdsman who were mainly Fulani people from Niger Republic (49%), northern Benin (47%) or Burkina Faso (4%). The average herd size was 55 ± 30 . Out of a total number of 2477 animals counted, 55.6% were identified as Borgou cattle (humpless \times humped), 22.2% as crossbred between Borgou and the native dwarf shorthorn cattle (Lagune), 15.6% as Lagune, 4.4% as N'Dama and 2.2% as Zebu Gudali. Sixty percent of the herds were fed exclusively on natural pasture. The remaining 40% additionally received crop residues. Most respondents mentioned wet seasons (61%) and the short dry season of July to September (27%) as the periods when forage is most available. Forage availability was also perceived as being highly affected by the expansion of peri-urban commercial vegetable gardens (98%), climate variability (98%), and urbanisation (71%). While all respondents were aware of the decrease of and difficulty to access grazing areas, most of them (87%) mentioned the disappearance of palatable forage species due to overgrazing. Splitting and moving herds in the long dry season (November-February) farther away from their permanent settlements towards wetlands and rural areas were the main adaptive feeding strategies reported by the herders.

Keywords: Cattle husbandry, coastal area, feeding strategies, urban fringe, West Africa