

Live Export Inquiry

I came to the Northern Territory in 1964 to set up a small beef operation as part of a pilot farm scheme and raised my five children here. During the 1960s we sold our turn-off cattle to the abattoir run by William Angliss (a Vestey company). The price we received was only about half of what was paid to producers in southern markets.

The prices we received were so low that it was almost impossible to make any sort of reasonable living. Yet during the 1970s, the abattoir in Katherine, NT, was able to pay the gardener \$1000/week! This was while producers were paid a pittance for their animals. Clearly, the union movement was not at all interested in the building of a successful cattle industry – only in ‘feathering the nests’ of its own members to the detriment of everyone else involved in the industry.

This period is known in the industry as the ‘cattle slump’ as prices were so low. Yet meat workers were paid extraordinary sums of money, in comparison to average earnings at that time. The northern meat industry was headed for annihilation, as it was incapable of operating competitively and efficiently.

Also in the 1970s, two innovative people, Ian Britten-Jones and David George, began a business called The Flying Tigers, where they flew cattle out of Darwin, exporting them to overseas destinations. They were able to pay more at the farm gate than either the Darwin or Katherine abattoirs would pay for cattle delivered to their yards.

So, with abattoir prices so ridiculously low, our operation joined the live export trade.

The north of Australia is not in a position to provide cattle for the southern markets. The journey by road is too long and the stock not of a type which is suitable. BUT our stock are suitable for the Indonesian market. We raise them to 350 kilograms and they can go into feedlots in Indonesia and be grown to a weight suitable to their needs. Indonesians get the value-added price.

Boxed beef for Indonesia, except for the larger cities, is not practical, because in most areas refrigeration is not available to hold the meat in a fresh, uncontaminated state. The village women like to know they are getting their meat fresh and so attend the ‘wet’ market each morning.

Australian exporters have been and still are working with the Indonesian people to help them use effective, safer ways to handle stock, with kindness and comfort. It is not easy, as there are many cultural differences, which reflect the very different values of people in the two nations, so it is going to take time.

The ships which take our cattle are specially designed and built for the comfort of stock for the short trip – about four to five days – to Indonesia.

There are many facets to the live export of cattle from the north of Australia; lots of towns are the hub from which cattle producers source their supplies of everything they need, including education facilities, fuel supplies, headquarters of transport, medical facilities and provision of food, clothing etc. Many people would be disadvantaged by the loss of this industry.

Why, if abattoirs are such wonderful facilities, are they all closed in the NT and indeed are they closing in many parts of Australia? Can we suggest it could be because of the huge demands of those who work in them, urged on by the union movement?

Jim and Barbara Sullivan

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