

ANIMALS FIJI

How to Care for your Cattle in Fiji



Commercial beef herd near Savusavu.



Opinion



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In Fiji, cattle farming is an important part of the agriculture sector and contributes significantly to the economy and food security.

Cattle can provide rural households with benefits such as animal protein in the form of meat and milk. They can also be used for weed control, transport and income from their sale.

Cattle in Fiji can also be kept as pets and in the Hindu culture, the cow is considered sacred and is worshipped. Cattle represent wealth, strength and motherly love, and are seen as earthly representations of the nurturing Mother Goddess and their milk is believed to have purifying qualities.

The major breeds of cattle in Fiji are Brahmans and Brahmin crosses, which are well suited to the tropical climate because of their tolerance for high temperatures and disease resistance. These breeds are primarily used for meat production.

Other types of beef cattle that have been introduced are the Santa Gertrudis, Angus and Hereford. Wagyu beef has been introduced due to the high-quality meat, which have worldwide recognition for quality meat. There are also dairy cattle breeds, namely Friesian, Jersey and Shorthorns.

Fijian farmers generally have small numbers of cattle mainly for personal use and food security. Cattle are often tethered during the day and then put in



Tethered and untethered cattle on a roadside near Labasa.

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a shelter at night. Some larger beef and dairy farmers provide meat and milk for commercial purposes.

To care for your cattle, here are some key points so that you can ensure their health and productivity.

- **Shelter:** Providing adequate shelter from extreme weather conditions such as heat and rain is important. Simple shelters or shade structures are suitable. During cyclones or extreme rainy conditions, take them to higher ground to prevent them from being isolated by flooding water. Also during a cyclone, it is important that the animals are not tied up and free to move away from danger.

- **Water:** Access to clean, fresh water is critical for cattle health. Ensuring a stable water supply is essential, especially during the dry season.

- **Feed:** Cattle in Fiji are primarily grass-fed on natural pasturelands. Unfortunately, natural pasture is often low

in feed quality, which reduces growth rates and animal health. If possible, rotational grazing on different pastures benefits the cow's nutrition and health by giving a variety of feed and also protecting it from diseases such as parasites and worms that may be present in some areas.

- **Healthcare:** Vaccinations, regular testing (particularly for Tuberculosis), checking for any signs of distress and monitoring your animal's condition are essential to keep your animal healthy.

- **Breeding:** Selecting the best bulls, matching a bull to the age or size of the cow and managing breeding cycles can help ensure healthy offspring. It is also important to not interbreed with family members, eg mother and son, father and daughter and between siblings.

- **Handling and management:** It is important, especially in the tropical Fijian climate, to handle cattle only in the cooler part of the day to avoid stress on the cattle and maintain overall health.

Cattle farming in Fiji is a vital component of the agriculture sector, providing livelihoods for many people. Despite facing challenges, such as Tuberculosis outbreaks, the industry plays a significant role in Fiji's agricultural economy, and efforts to improve sustainability and productivity are ongoing.

Always, if you have any concerns about your animal, visit your veterinary clinic or call for an appointment to arrange a home visit or a mobile phone consultation.

Animals Fiji is a non-profit agency and depends on donations to continue in its work to support animals across Fiji.

To find out more about its services and how you can help please contact their Savusavu Clinic on (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic on (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at www.animalsfiji.org.

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MAIN DISEASES

Bovine Tuberculosis (TB) is a significant concern in cattle, especially in Fiji, and government programme are in place to reduce its occurrence. TB mainly affects cows, but it can spread to other animals, including humans. Bacteria cause the disease and can be passed to other animals and humans by inhaling infected air or drinking infected milk.

It can cause weight loss, coughing and weakness in cattle, reducing milk and meat production. It can cause death in severe cases.

The best methods to control TB are continual testing for the disease and removing infected cattle to decrease the spread of the disease. Fiji's Ministry of Agriculture offers free testing for tuberculosis.

It is believed that the recent large improvement in milk yield per head of cattle is a result of improved control of TB in dairy herds.

- **Mastitis** is also common in Fiji and can severely affect milk production. Mastitis is an inflammation of the cow's udder. A bacterial infection typically causes it, although in some cases, it can be caused by a physical injury to the area. Mastitis can cause the udder to become swollen, red and painful. It can reduce milk production and cause changes in the milk's appearance, causing it to look watery and lumpy. Mastitis can be treated with antibiotics, ensuring the udder is kept clean and using good milking techniques. This includes cleaning the udder and teats with a damp cloth or pre-milking teat dip, ensuring that any milking equipment is clean and sanitised, and attending to any cracked or sore teats after milking is completed.

- **Dystocia** or difficulty in giving birth. Dystocia is relatively common in Fiji because of the many different cattle breeds and their interbreeding. Dystocia can happen if the calf is too big or in the wrong position or the cow's uterus is weakened. Dystocia can be risky for the cow and calf and can result

in death or either or both. Treatment usually involves the assistance of a veterinarian who may need to manually help with the birth or perform a caesarean section to deliver the calf safely.

Parasites, such as gastrointestinal worms, ticks and liver flukes, can lead to weight loss, reducing meat and milk production. Regularly moving cattle to different pastures reduces the risk of being infected by different parasites. Consultation with your veterinarian will give you the best advice on tick, worm and other parasite control that is relevant to the Fijian climate.

Other health issues

- **Nutrition.** Cattle mainly eat natural pastures such as grass and other plants where they graze. This natural pasture alone may not contain enough nutrition for the cow to remain healthy. Their general appearance may decline, and milk and meat production suffer. To overcome this, farmers can feed them high-protein hay, grains and mineral supplements to keep them healthy and resilient to disease and other stresses.

- **Heat stress.** Heat stress in cattle occurs when they cannot cool down properly in hot and humid conditions. The symptoms can include breathing faster, drooling and appearing tired. In severe cases, it can lead to heat stroke and death.

To avoid and treat heat stress in animals, provide them shady areas with good airflow and ample clean water supplies. In severe cases, a veterinarian should be called who can provide intravenous fluids or other treatments to stabilise them. It is best to avoid handling or transporting cattle during the hottest part of the day to avoid heat stress.

General

Other issues affect cattle, such as diarrhoea in young calves and foot rot if the animal is in constant muddy conditions. If you have any concerns about your animal's health, call your local veterinarian and arrange a home visit.