

## Sale Trends of Swakara Pelt Offered at the Copenhagen Fur Auction from 1994-2013

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to assess and document the performance of the Namibia Swakara pelt sold at the Copenhagen Fur Auction from 1994 to 2013. The Karakul sheep was first introduced into Namibia in 1907 from Central Asia via Germany. Thereafter, Karakul farming slowly developed into a new agricultural enterprise in Namibia, provided jobs to thousands of Namibians, and contributed significantly to Namibia's economy. Revolutionary work was done in the improvement of Karakul pelt in Namibia, resulting in pelts that are different from the original Karakul species with very unique pelts that have short hair, exceptional patterns and better hair texture. Hence, the renaming of the Karakul sheep to Swakara. The Swakara pelts are exported for auctions at Copenhagen, Denmark. However, the performance on its auctions is not well documented. This study involved historical data recorded on the numbers of Swakara in Namibia, pelts sold at Copenhagen Fur Auction, and gross income from the Swakara sheep industry from 1994 to 2013. Descriptive statistics were computed. The overall estimated Swakara flock in Namibia and South Africa in 2013 is 261,848 and 34,254, respectively. Results showed that the number of Swakara pelts offered at Copenhagen Fur between 1994 and 2013 fluctuated, with year 2003 having the highest number of pelts offered, of 144,035. The average price per pelt has been increasing steadily from (N\$ 62.5 in 1994, to N\$ 697 in 2013), and the gross income ranged from N\$ 7,607,284 in 1994, to N\$ 86,315,323 in 2013.

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**Keywords:** Karakul, Pelt, Pelt quality, Sheep, Swakara

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### Introduction

The Karakul, a broad-tailed sheep with long hair which produces curly pelts originates from Central Asia (Bravenboer, 2007). The breed is named after a village called Karakul, in West Turkistan, a high altitude region with little water and it is therefore very hardy and well adapted to arid conditions. It is mainly kept for "fur", or pelt. Other products include milk, meat, and wool (Nasholm & Eythorsdottir, 2011; Bravenboer, 2007), which provides the advantage of diversification.

The first twelve Karakul sheep consisting of seven ewes, two rams and three lambs were imported into Namibia from Germany in 1907 (Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development, 1998). In Germany, the Karakul was imported from Buchara, the "Karakul-heimat" (home of the Karakul) that lies in the central Asian – west Turkistan in 1903 (Bravenboer, 2007). The second consignment of 23 rams and 251 ewes arrived in Namibia in 1909 (Campbell, 2007). Since a large part of Namibia is arid or semi-desert, especially the South of Namibia with very little and erratic rainfall, the climate is excellent for Karakul farming (Bravenboer, 2007). Soon after its introduction into Namibia, the Namibian Karakul industry decided to focus on producing quality pelts. This was followed by intensive research and strategic breeding programmes, which resulted in pelts with short hair, exceptional patterns and better hair texture (Figure 1.1-1.2). From modest beginnings, production increased to 23,000 pelts produced with gross value of R 34,500 in 1925, to 1,975,683 pelts produced with gross value of R 8,613,978 in 1960, to 2,240,801 pelts produced with gross value of R 14,027,414 (Kirsten, 1966). Schoeman (1998) stated that by 1970, more than 95% of the 4.4 million sheep in Namibia were Karakuls and in 1979, almost 5 million pelts were exported from Namibia to the European markets.

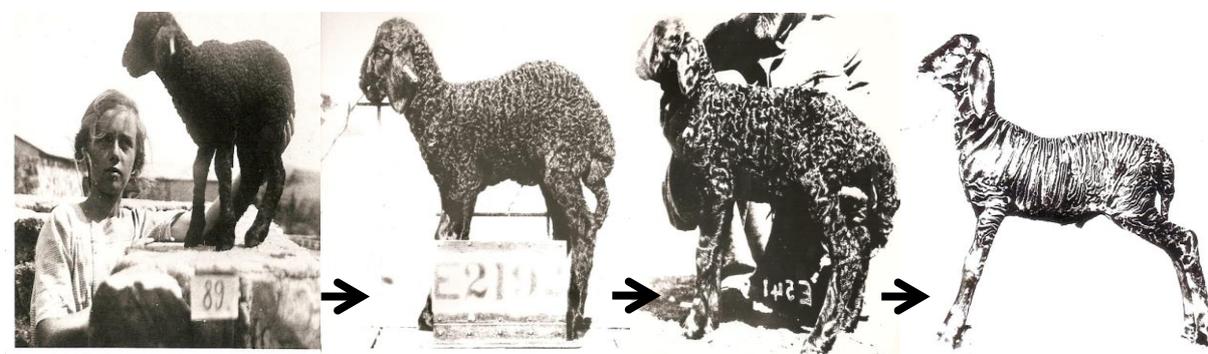
At its prime, the Karakul industry employed thousands of Namibians, and contributed significantly to the economy of Namibia (Schoeman, 1998). The flourishing agricultural enterprise was referred to as the "black diamond" of the Namib Desert. The term black was reflecting the original black colour of the Karakul sheep.

In the 1980s, the Karakul industry almost totally collapsed. This was as a cumulative result of various factors including economic recession conditions in consumer countries, changes in fashion whereby lifestyle had changed within a short period of time from formal to very informal and anti-fur campaigns (Schoeman, 1998). However, there has been resurgence in the Namibian Pelt industry, which today is a small, but thriving industry that offers sought-after pelt products.

In 2012, the Namibian authorities granted permission for the Karakul breed name to change to Swakara (coined from South West Africa Karakul), because of the significant differences between the pelts of the Namibian lambs, and those of other Karakul origin, and the need to distinguish the Namibian pelt-producing breed from the rest of the Karakul-producing countries. Genome sequencing is underway to prove genetic differences between the Namibian Swakara and Karakul breeds. Moreover, this will allow international recognition protection of the Namibian Swakara sheep breed. Although only black lambs were originally bred in Namibia, today primarily four natural colour types are found in the Namibian Swakara sheep namely black, white, grey (Figures 1.3) and brown (Bravenboer, 2007). Other colours found in the Swakara sheep are spotted that range from small spots on white body to large black patches on white skin (Figure 1.4). In Namibia, Swakara producers are required to adhere to the Swakara industry's code of practice (Kruger *et al.*, 2013). For example, induced abortion is illegal in Namibia. The code of practice focuses on welfare of Swakara sheep, it set out strict ethical parameters regarding humane treatment of the Swakara and farming methods. Fundamentally, farmers are required to practice sound husbandry practices, and farms in Namibia are subject to animal health inspection at least once a year. Euthanasia of Swakara lambs must be undertaken in as humane a way as possible, in order to minimize the stress and pain involved (The Karakul Board of Namibia, 2006). The use of an electrically powered stunner to stun the lambs prior to euthanasia has been shown to cause less stress than euthanasia without stunning. The stunning and euthanasia processes are conducted by well trained Personnel, under supervision (The Karakul Board of Namibia).

Agra ProVision manages a pelt-sorting centre in Windhoek, the only one in Africa, responsible for the collecting, sorting and marketing of Swakara pelts. Each pelt is marked with a bar-coded tag that includes the producer's marketing number. The Namibian pelts are sold biannually under the brand label *Swakara*, at the Copenhagen Fur Auction in Denmark, in April and September (Kruger *et al.*, 2013). The Swakara has received an internationally recognised status for being a sustainable and natural product, and became part of the 'origin assured' (OA) approved list of countries and species of the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF). The single biggest challenge facing Swakara producers in Namibia is to significantly increase pelt numbers without compromising pelt quality.

Although Swakara pelts are exported for auctions, performance on its auctions is not well documented. Therefore the aim of this paper is to assess the performance of Swakara pelts offered at Copenhagen Fur Auction from 1994-2013, considering the number of pelts and average prices offered and the gross income. It also aims to document and disseminate the information on Namibian pelt-producing breed, to create awareness, motivate researchers to conduct research on Swakara sheep breed, and encourage farmers to produce Swakara sheep, thereby resulting in diversification.



**Figure 1.1** Upgrading of karakul sheep from 1907 to the current Swakara sheep with unique pelt.



**Figure 1.2** Unique and quality Swakara pelt



**Figure 1.3** Different colours of Swakara pelt



**Figure 1.4** Spotted Swakara pelts ranging from small black spots on the body to large black patches

## Materials and Methods

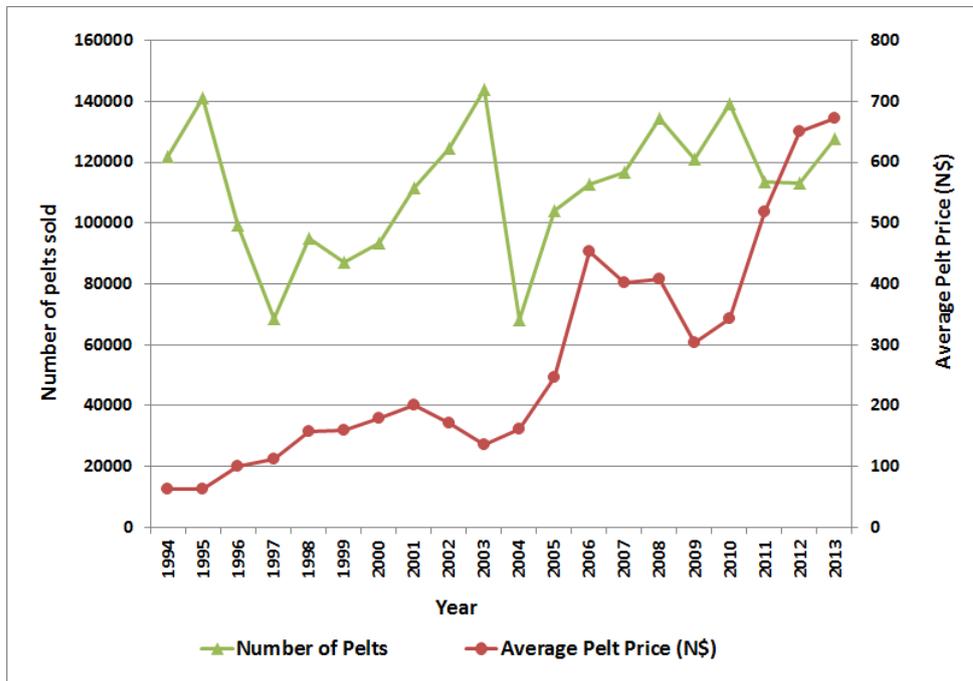
Historical data dated from 1994 to 2013 on the number of Swakara pelts sold at Copenhagen Fur Auction, average prices and gross income from the Swakara sheep industry were used in this study. The data were sourced from Agra-pelt centre in Windhoek, Namibia. Agra Pelt centre is the only centre in Africa, responsible for the collecting; sorting and marketing of Swakara pelts. Data were sorted and descriptive statistics were computed.

## Results and Discussion

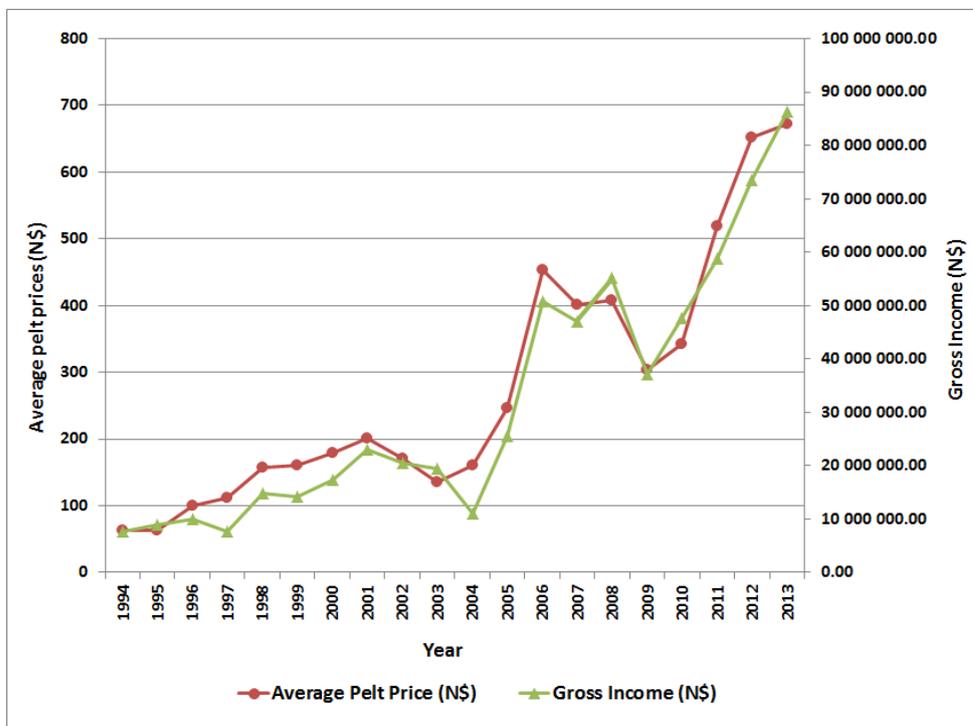
The overall estimated Swakara flock in Namibia and South Africa in 2013 is 261,848 and 34,254, respectively (Kruger *et al*, 2013). The number of Swakara pelts offered at Copenhagen fur auction between 1994 and 2013 fluctuated, with 2003 having the highest number of 144,035 and the lowest recorded in 2004 and 1997, when only 68203 and 68552 pelts were offered, respectively (Figure 2.1). The decrease in 2004 could be attributed to the change in the auction date, which used to be in June and December since 1998 to 2003, and changed to April and September from 2004 to 2013, at the customers' request. The decline in 1997 could be due to the spill-over effect of the worldwide anti-fur campaigns, favourable prices for mutton and lamb as compared to fur prices, poor flock management, high input costs and/ or the general negativity toward pelt sheep farming (Campbell, 2007).

The average price per pelt has been increasing steadily from, N\$ 62.5 in 1994, to N\$ 697 in 2013 (Figure 2.1). The preferred colour is white, and the highest price ever for white pelt during the study period (1994-2013) was sold in 2013 for N\$ 2,534.54 (data not presented). However, the price of Swakara is linked to prevailing fashion trends and such high prices are not always assured. Although only black lambs were originally bred in Namibia, today four primarily natural colour types are found in the Namibian Swakara sheep namely black, white, grey (Figures 1.2 and 1.3) and brown (Bravenboer, 2007; Kruger *et al*, 2013). Other colours include Sur (brown) and spotted. The preferred colour is white, which can be dyed to many other different shades. Spotted pelts are discounted. Within different colours, the pelt price is predominantly determined by curl type, pattern score, hair quality score and hair length traits and the contribution from other traits such as pelt thickness and hair thickness is minimal (Schoeman, 1998).

The gross income from Swakara pelts ranged from N\$ 7,607,284 in 1994, to N\$ 86,315,323 in 2013 (Figure 2.2). This is a result of better prices per pelt realized at auctions and favorable exchange rate for exporters.



**Figure 2.1** Number of Swakara pelts and average pelt price offered at Copenhagen Fur Auction from 1994 to 2013.



**Figure 2.2** Average pelt price and gross income from Swakara pelts from 1994 and 2013.

It is expected that the gross income from Swakara pelts will continue to increase, as the number of pelt produced per year increases, without compromising pelt quality. The Namibian Swakara producers are required to adhere to the Code of Practice for Swakara producers in Namibia, and internationally, the Swakara brand is well established (Kruger *et al*, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Swakara is a small but thriving industry in Namibia, which offers pelts of very high quality, and globally sought-after. The industry is unique. It contributes significantly to the Namibian economy and the Namibian government has considered Swakara pelts as a strategic product.

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