



Improving animal health in rural Eastern Cape

The Donald Woods Foundation (DWF) is working closely with subsistence and small-scale farmers in the former Transkei to boost animal health and overall food security. **Grant Hollins** visited the Donald Woods Centre in Hobeni to meet with **Ralph Spence**, who runs the programme on behalf of the DWF.

Founded in 2003, the Donald Woods Foundation was established to commemorate the life of South African journalist and anti-apartheid activist, Donald James Woods.

The foundation initiated its Livestock Support Programme in 2014. From its base near the Donald Woods Centre in Hobeni in rural Eastern Cape, the programme provides practical help to rural small-scale and subsistence farmers. Training is given in drug management, herd fertility, controlling parasites and optimising overall grazing practices.

Ralph Spence, assisted by Richard Ndoko, runs the programme.

"Basic animal health is what we do. We get medicines at

cost and then go round to the villages to provide dosages to animals in need," he explains.

THE PROGRAMME

The rural Eastern Cape is home to predominantly Xhosa speakers, for whom livestock is of great cultural importance. Ralph explains that the Livestock Support Programme is thus a crucial component of the DWF's upliftment objectives.

"Traditionally, livestock is extremely important in Xhosa culture and most homesteads have some form of livestock, either for their own subsistence or for sale to the locals, mainly for traditional purposes," says Ralph. "We want to give these farmers opportunities to make better livelihoods from their

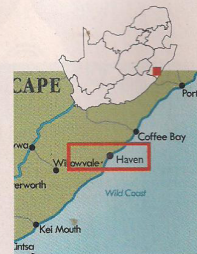
ABOVE: The Donald Woods Foundation's Livestock Support Programme supplies smallholders with cost-price veterinary medication by the dose. This enables homestead farmers to afford regular care for their livestock, thus improving the overall quality of their animals. Here, Richard Ndoko doses a sheep held by a herdsman while Phumzile Govuza prepares to catch the next animal to be dosed. **PHOTOS: GRANT HOLLINS**

livestock and, in the process, teach them general care methods one would normally employ on a farm."

Once a month, Ralph visits 22 villages surrounding the Donald Woods Centre to administer medicine. At present, the programme concentrates on surrounding villages only. This is primarily a result of a standard practice, which dictates that livestock be kraaled until 11am before being allowed to roam the commonage. Because of this, Ralph has only a small window of opportunity for his duties every day.

CUTTING COSTS FOR FARMERS

The project allows a farmer to ensure the treatment of livestock at minimum cost. Generic equivalents are administered, and dosages are



charged individually at cost price. This also saves the farmer from having to purchase medicines in larger quantities than needed. The fact that Ralph visits the homesteads to administer the medicines also saves the farmers money. The region is isolated, with roads disappearing into a quagmire of mud when the rains come, so travel to and from the centres that stock the medicines is often difficult, and taxi fares are costly. "I would normally have to take a taxi all the way to Idutywa or Mthatha [a two-hour drive of 115km] to get the medicines," explains Shephard Mtoto, one of Ralph's clients. "It's very expensive, but now Ralph comes here to administer the medicine."

MIXED RESPONSE FROM THE COMMUNITY

While the project has been well received by most communities, it has been met with some resistance in areas where traditionalism is still strong.

"We started off developing around Hobeni, where there are about 15 villages. However, not all these villages support the programme," Ralph says. "There's still a lot of superstition sometimes, and some farmers prefer traditional medicines."

Despite this, the programme's popularity is growing, especially in areas where the foundation's *Health in every Hut Programme* is operating, and Ralph finds that at each stop, more and more livestock owners are asking for his assistance. He attributes this to the testimony of happy customers.



ABOVE: Most rural homesteads in the Transkei keep some form of livestock. The animals usually remain kraaled in the yard until 11am, when they are released to roam the surrounding commonage.

FAST FACTS

The Donald Woods Foundation Livestock Support Programme visits homesteads in the rural Eastern Cape to assist with animal health.

Medicines are charged at cost price.

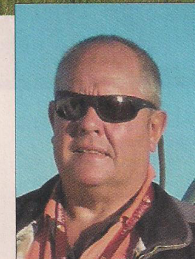
The project has a strong educational component.

"It's mainly word-of-mouth, and if people see that there's something we offer that will be beneficial to them, they're keen to participate," he says. "We get phone calls, sometimes as early as 3am, with some guy saying his cow is sick. We also get invitations from other villages."

SATISFIED CLIENTS

One of Ralph's clients, Mzwanele Msumpa, farms sheep and pays cash for his medicine. He readily explains how the programme has benefited him.

"This is the second time I'm using this," he says. "It's beneficial for us because my sheep are very good and healthy and they come each month to do the follow-ups. I'm very happy."



RALPH SPENCE

It is not uncommon for Ralph's services to be requested while he is travelling from one farm to the next. In the case of new clients, Richard administers the required dosages, while Ralph records the client's details and schedules a return visit, before receiving payment.

Another one of Ralph's clients, DWF employee, Phumzile Govuza, runs 23 cattle and 104 sheep. His father, Jim, fondly remembers Jack Woods, Donald Woods's father, who had a

Ineffective dipping and nutritional challenges

The primary illnesses that Ralph Spence and Richard Ndoko encounter are tick-related. Ralph explains that while communal dipping occurs regularly, it is often ineffective.

"While farmers dip their cattle every week, the dips are often not properly managed. Farmers seldom take samples after dipping or actively apply dip when it's needed, so the dips can be ineffective," he explains.

With growing populations in these rural areas, grazing has become a problem in winter. To combat this, the programme supplies licks to supplement the animals' meagre diets during this time. As a means of alleviating the nutritional challenges during the dry winter period, Ralph encourages smallholders to plant feed. Due to inadequate fencing, however, these crops are often quickly consumed by both domesticated and wild animals.



trading store where the Donald Woods Centre now stands.

"The Woods family always helped us back then too," he says. "Since the centre started, they're really helping us by giving us jobs and coming around to our houses to ensure that we're all healthy and that our animals aren't sick. They're doing very good things."

EDUCATING FARMERS

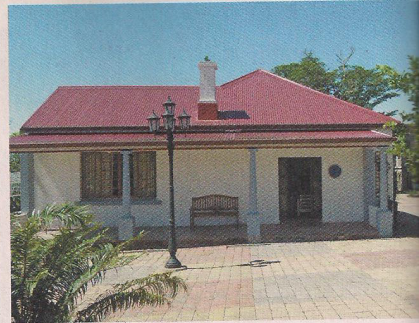
The farmers' days are the educational component of the programme. These are hosted at the centre and include practical demonstrations of farming

techniques and methods for improving livestock health.

"We often have farmers' days at the centre and veterinary supply companies attend. There are also sometimes talks on the radio on animal care and veterinary products," says Ralph.

He adds that most small-scale and subsistence farmers are aware of livestock ailments and the various treatments and products available to combat them.

"Farmers often ask me for particular brands, which are often the most expensive ones. These



ABOVE LEFT: Richard Ndoko, assisted by a village resident, treats a sheep in desperate need of attention in the Hobeni area of the Transkei.

ABOVE: The programme is based at the Donald Woods Centre, located at the old trading store run by the Woods family for five generations after arriving in South Africa with the 1820 settlers. The centre has retained many of the old buildings.

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farmers don't want the cheaper, generic versions we offer."

The programme also endeavours to work closely with animal technicians at the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and participates in the various drives the department hosts every year.

EXPANSION

The programme's long-term goals are to expand to other areas, and to promote sustainability. Ralph intends to train field workers, such as Richard, who will be provided with medicines to serve a particular area. The operation will be managed from an agricultural centre.

"We want the farmers to be sustainable. So we're training Richard and will eventually give him the medicines and allow him to service this area before we move on to focus on other areas. The idea is to start a regional, co-op service centre at Hobeni for maize and other agricultural operations. I would be based there and have field workers helping the farmers," he says.

• Phone Ralph Spence on 073 160 3671 or Barbara Manning on 083 708 2728. Email media@donaldwoods.org or phone the Donald Woods Foundation on 043 726 0209. To donate, visit www.donaldwoodsfoundation.org. ■ FW

The development of the Livestock Support Programme

Ralph Spence was raised in Barkly East and matriculated at Queen's College. He attended the University of Natal, studying toward a bachelor's degree in agriculture. After two years (1977-1978), he discontinued his studies, went to work and then attended Cedara Agricultural College.

Here, he completed a two-year diploma in agriculture. He worked as a farm manager at an abattoir in Elliot and then as a veterinary medical representative before opening a business in Queenstown. "I eventually had a wool, hide and skin business in Queenstown for a while," says Ralph. "But I've been in [the former Transkei] since 2004, dealing with livestock mostly."

Ralph became involved with the Donald Woods Foundation (DWF) two years ago, after meeting Donald Woods's

son Dillon, chief executive of the DWF. With the help of John Alwood, the prior chief director of technical services at the Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture and Land Affairs, Ralph composed a proposal detailing the livestock health programme and how it could expand the foundation's already important work.

"The animal health care project is an extension of the foundation's *Health in every Hut* programme," says Ralph. "It's an important programme, and making a difference in people's lives is very rewarding."

Ralph speaks isiXhosa fluently, and describes himself as a 'small livestock man'. The DWF calls Ralph a 'farmer at heart', who is happiest when assisting regional farmers.

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