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## DEER FARMING – THE ALTAI WAY

By Marika McKinnon

Mountainous terrain, forests and wild black bears . . . not exactly what we in Australia would describe as ideal deer farming country but, in the Altai region of Siberia, this is exactly how it is done.

Altai deer farmers run on average around 1000 deer (85% of farmed deer in Siberia are maral deer) on very large hectares (on average 1 animal per 2 ha) in these mountainous regions, with smaller fenced enclosures for mating and velveting. Animals are herded on horses, brought down to enclosures and kept there for approximately two months of the mating season, where one stag is put with around 25 females. Stags also stay in these enclosures until the velvet season is finished and are then let back out.

Velveting methods there are also quite different – not only the process of cutting, but also the storage. According to Siberian age old traditions, it is believed that freezing velvet or deer blood actually destroys the vital cells which contain the health benefits. Due to this, velvet is cut and straight away processed on the farm by each deer farmer. Once fully dried, it is sold to velvet product manufacturers who pay according to the quality, anywhere between US\$90 to US\$300 /kg. These prices are down from US\$800 – US\$900 /kg received in the 1990's when the velvet market first really took off in Siberia.

Talking to Alexander Popov, chairman of the Deer Farmers Union of Siberia, we learn that even though the actual farming methods are so vastly different from ours, one thing is not different on the other side of the world . . . the prices received for velvet by deer farmers are nowhere near enough for farmers to live comfortably.

Currently there are approximately 100,000 deer on around 138 deer farms in Siberia, with around 30 types of premium dried deer velvet products being developed among the 12 leading velvet manufacturers.

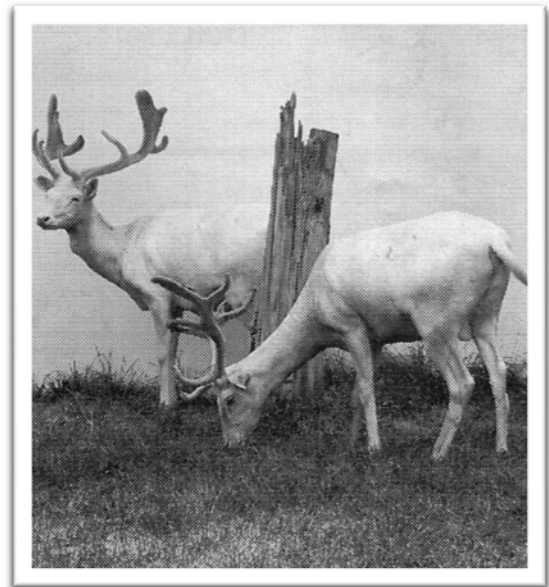
Emphasis is placed on maximum preservation of the healing properties and with modern, highly refined technologies being implemented all the time to achieve this, consumers are growing more confident in using deer velvet products. Current domestic consumption is 20% of the whole regional production, with plans being implemented to increase this to 50%.

The Siberian deer industry development program for 2010 looks at the following:

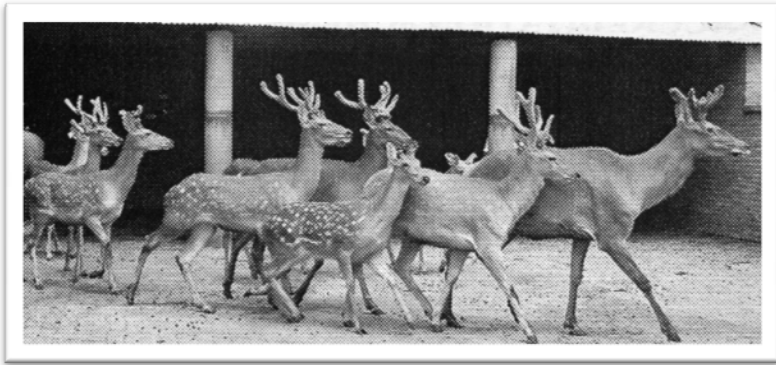
- Controlled deer population growth
- Strengthen animal health care
- Improve traditional processing procedures
- Build healthcare facilities that specialize in velvet treatments
- Continue scientific research

Now, what about the black bears?

Black bears roaming deer farming land only take a few animals a year and at this stage are more of a nuisance than a problem.



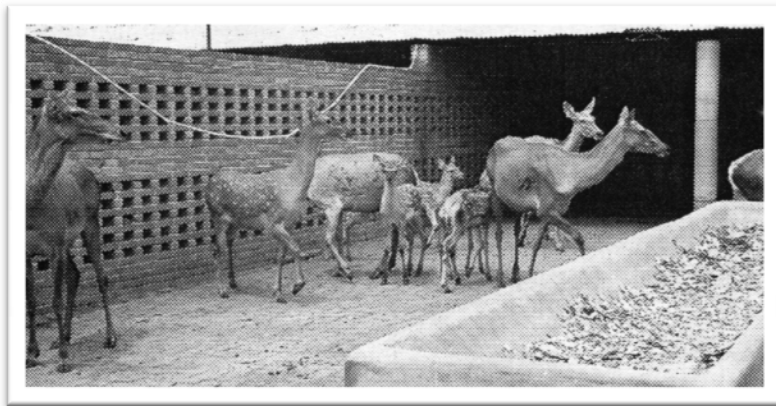
*White fallow near Beijing*



*From the right – maral, sika x maral, sika*



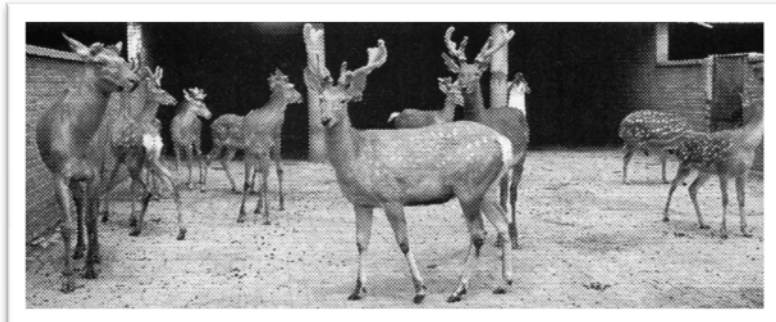
*Deer antler knife handles*



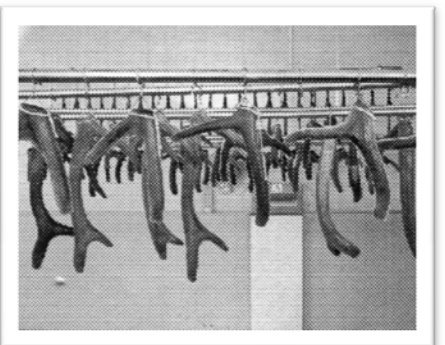
*Mainly maral. Sika x maral second from left*



*Antler by-products*



*From the left towards front – maral, sika x maral (centre), sika*



*Drying velvet*



*I wish my deer were this quiet!!*