EMU FARMING

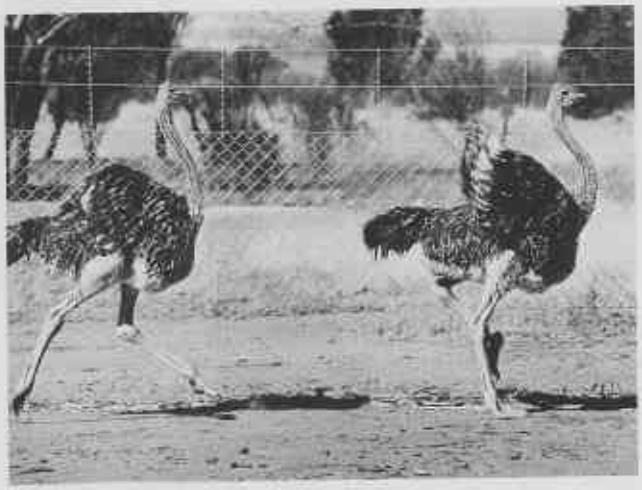
Emu farming has started in Western Australia on a property at North Kalannie where over one hundred emus form the basis of the breeding stock to support a scheme to produce over 5,000 skins a year.

In the past 25 years exotic leathers, such as crocodile, lizard and ostrich, have grown in importance on the world markets; ostrich leather for example fetches $20-$25 per square foot. In South Africa, in 1969, two far-sighted Swiss businessmen-cum-farmers, Messrs H. Kaegi and H. Wuthrich, made a study of the ostrich farming industry and recognised an untapped potential for emu farming in Australia.

Mr. Kaegi and Mr. Wuthrich arrived in Western Australia in January 1970 and set about sounding out the relevant Government Departments for assistance and guidance. Although the idea may have seemed a little outlandish at first hearing, it rapidly became apparent that the two gentlemen had researched the scheme thoroughly, and had sufficient financial backing to see it through.

Wild emus are unsuitable for producing top quality leather because the pelts are usually damaged on the back; so for emu farming to be successful the emus must be bred and reared in captivity. This meant that a 6 ft. high strong fence had to be built to enclose the breeding stock. The lower 18 inches consists of rabbit proof netting, the middle 3 ft. of chain mesh, and there are three plain wires which run along the top. This fence costs $2,500 per mile.

The company formed by Mr. Kaegi and Mr. Wuthrich is called Emu Experimental and Research Farms Pty. Ltd. Other partners are a neighbouring farmer, Mr. J. MacNamara, and a Perth solicitor, Mr. A. Williams. The company has a four stage development programme.



Emus at Kalannie, note fence in background (Photograph by courtesy Sunday Independent)

1st stage

Construction of 80 breeding pens.

Purchase of incubators.

Building up of a stock of 5,000 emus over a period of 5 years.

Construction of rearing pens.

2nd stage

Construction of further rearing pens.

Increasing of the stock to 10,000 emus.

Construction of an abattoir.

3rd stage

Construction of a tannery.

4th stage

Construction of a leather goods manufacturing plant.

Building up a stock of 5,000 emus is by no means an easy venture. It is not feasible to take adult emus in the wild as they cannot be domesticated and are therefore useless as breeding birds. Consequently emu chicks have to be raised on the farm. The initial breeding stock of about 100 birds, consists of chicks taken in the wild, pet emus given by local farmers, and birds from the C.S.I.R.O. research station. Calculating an average of 9 eggs a year, 110 breeding couples will provide the rising generation of 1000. The following year double the amount of birds will be kept for breeding purposes and in the third year again 110 birds in addition. This gives a yearly increase of 3,000 young birds from the fourth year onwards.

Mr. Kaegi points out that these figures are theoretical, based on the observations of the ostrich under farming conditions, and only experience will tell if the emu will behave in the same way.

The first tanning trials with emu skins were carried out by a tannery in Sydney. The results were absolutely disastrous. The tanned product was far from being a leather, let alone a high quality fine leather. However, with the assistance of a worldwide Swiss chemical concern and after many experiments, a high quality fine leather was produced. The leather, coming as it does from a unique bird, has a singular pattern with no similarity to other skins. Leather and fashion specialists have declared unanimously that this unique and attractive leather is suitable for the manufacture of clothing, handbags, shoes, travel goods etc. One of the largest exporters of skins in Australia and South East Asia has gone on record as saying "I think we should have no problems in disposing of your entire production without much trouble".

Mr. H. Kaegi with emu skin prior to tanning (Photograph by courtesy Sunday Independent)

Apart from the skin, other parts of the bird have a commercial value—feathers for feather dusters; flesh for pet meat; blood, waste meat and bones for fertiliser; and fat for soap. It is obvious that if the project succeeds it will benefit the State's economy. In addition to boosting export figures, the project will assist the local farming community, for Mr. Kaegi estimates 200,000 bushels of grain per year will be required to feed his total stock. Also, in the second stage of development, local farmers will be offered young birds to rear and sell back for slaughtering, and in the third and fourth stages of development the tannery and manufacturing plants will provide local employment for up to 300 people. It is a bold venture which deserves to succeed.

FOOTNOTE: Emus have been classed as vermin in W.A. for many years. In 1969/70 over 27,000 beaks were presented for the bounty payment of 40 cents each. In 1970/71 the figure dropped to 12,400, but this is due more to the decreased bounty of 20 cents than to any reduction in numbers of emus. The bounty has now been removed, because the Agriculture Protection Board feel that it was bounty hunters killing for profit rather than farmers protecting their property, who were taking most emus. Organised hunting causes the birds to damage vermin fences far more than if the birds are left alone.