

# Editorial

## The International Year of Natural Fibres

This year has been declared the 'International Year of Natural Fibres'. It is estimated that 35 million tonnes of natural plant and animal fibres are produced annually. Natural fibres contribute to the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people around the globe. The range of fibre-providing animal species extends from rabbits to old- and new-world camelids. Producers range from Bedouins roaming the deserts and gatherers who capture animals from the wild, harvest their wool and then set them free, to sedentary livestock keepers in nearly all parts of the world.

Most fibre-producing livestock are kept in extensive, often dry, agro-ecosystems where their ability to convert plants inedible to humans into useful products makes them one of the few livelihood options available. While in some countries, such as Uruguay and Lesotho, wool has been the most important product of the sheep sector, fibre is very often a by-product of meat or milk production. The added value obtained from fibre production is a crucial livelihood component for pastoral and smallholder livestock keepers in many of the world's marginal production systems.

Over the past half-century, natural fibres have been displaced from our clothing, household furnishings, industries and agriculture by human-made fibres. The success of synthetics is mainly a consequence of their relatively lower price, as labour costs for harvesting fibre from animals have generally increased over time. The downturn in the animal-fibre market has greatly affected the primary producer and the industry; for example, the sheep population of

Australia, a prime wool-producing country, declined from a peak of 180 million in the mid-1980s to approximately 75 million in 2009.

Animal-fibre products are, however, still products of choice. Animal fibres are a healthy choice as they provide good ventilation and insulation – Bedouins wear thin woollen material to protect them from heat and sun. They are a socially responsible choice because they provide a livelihood for millions of people, especially in developing countries. Animal fibres are an environmentally sustainable choice because they are carbon neutral, recyclable and 100% biodegradable. They are also fashionable, particularly in the emerging 'green' economy with its demand for eco-friendly products. In addition to garments and household goods, wool is used to produce thermal and acoustic insulation for construction and pads for soaking up oil spills.

To contribute to the International Year of Natural Fibres, *AGRI* is publishing this special issue to highlight the importance of these valuable animal products. We had an excellent response to our call for manuscripts – from all continents and on a range of species and products. Manuscripts submitted for consideration for publication dealt not only with technical aspects but also with the social aspects of fibre production and niche marketing of fibre products to promote and sustain breeds that would otherwise be at risk.

A word of thanks is due to Drs Hassanein Elgabbas, Usama Elsaied and Wagdy Mekki who assisted the Editorial Advisory Board in reviewing the manuscripts.