Introduction

The two major groups of camelids, the species belonging to the genus *Camelus* (dromedary and Bactrian camels) and the species of the genus *Lama* (llama, alpaca, guanaco and vicuña) contribute effectively to the welfare and livelihoods of people in harsh and difficult environments: hot and cold deserts, and highlands. The first group is autochthonous to Asia and Africa and the second group originates in South America. Although frugal in habits and of legendary resistance to long periods without water and feed, they are remarkable producers of milk, meat, hair and work. Improved management could enhance this contribution and improve the livelihoods of communities depending on them.

The workshop that originates the present publication took place during the 34th ICAR Session in Sousse, Tunisia, May 2004. The local organizers suggested that camelids would constitute an appropriate theme for a one-day meeting and this idea was embraced by both ICAR and FAO. The purpose of this workshop was to offer participants the possibility:

- to get acquainted with camelid production systems in Africa, Asia and South America, including environmental, management, health, breeding, reproductive and market aspects;
- to gain insight on the status of camelid genetic resources in several countries of Africa, Asia and South America;
- to discuss actual – if existing – and potential recording systems for camelids with emphasis on milk, meat and fiber production;
- to evaluate the need for research and development in camelids at regional and global level;
- to exchange experiences among participants coming from different world areas.

These objectives were largely met, although much remains to be done. Research on camelids lags behind that of most species used for food and agriculture and it has been said that these species have almost been neglected by science. This may be associated with the fact that they are of limited geographical distribution and remoteness of location, again in comparison with more widely used species. Although in general people closely dependent on camelids have a thorough traditional knowledge of their animals, they lack much information that could be provided by scientific research.

The present proceedings touch on several aspects of camelid production. The first three articles contribute general perspectives on dromedaries, Bactrian camels, llama, guanaco, alpaca and vicuña. Following, camel production systems in Africa and in Asia are considered. The next four articles describe camel genetic resources in North Africa, Morocco,

Mongolia and Arabian Gulf countries. Dairy productivity potential in camels is discussed in the next article, while meat and fiber recording systems are the subjects of the two subsequent papers. Two more articles close the proceedings, one on llama production systems in Bolivia and the other on production systems of alpaca and vicuñas.

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