

Weaning Water Buffalo Calves

(Recommended Practice for all Buffalo Producers)

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BACKGROUND

Weaning swamp buffalo calves is not a common practice on many commercial farms in the Northern Territory. Given the greater potential for increased growth rates in calves on temperate or improved pastures in the tropics or on temperate pastures in southern Australia and the need for improving meat quality, there are advantages to incorporate a regular weaning program for buffalo calves in the farm or station operation. Such a program is important even for the extensively-run herd to improve the manageability of turn-off stock.

However, **early** weaning of buffalo calves often encounters mortality problems as the dam-calf bond seems stronger in buffalo than in cattle. Orphaned buffalo are often difficult to rear; they lose their appetite and the will to live. Weaning a calf at less than 100 kg live-weight often entails risks. But weaning at above 150 kg, and especially above 200 kg, usually poses no problems at all in separating the dam from her calf. Strangely, despite buffalo cows being very good mothers, when weaned calves are kept in the yards the first day, there are few instances of cows waiting at the yards the next morning as is often the case in cattle.



ADVANTAGES OF WEANING

The main advantage of weaning buffalo calves is the associated weaner training program which determines their temperament for the rest of their lives. The main aim of the training is to overcome their shyness, fear and trepidation of human presence, which normally increases stress levels. Once stressed, an animal behaves less rationally and is more difficult to work with.

With the increasing challenges of meat quality assurance programs and the supply of better quality stock, weaner training is one concrete avenue to address these issues. This is important not only in the buffalo industry, but all livestock industries. Hopefully, buyers will start to recognise the importance of this training for their local and overseas customers when delivering manageable animals and will pay for them accordingly.

The occupational health and safety implications of quiet, easily managed buffalo are also obvious.

Research by the Beef CRC has shown that properly-weaned cattle calves perform better later on in the feedlot and produce better quality meat. There is no reason why buffalo should be any different.

The reason for weaning is to remove the calf from the dam (which makes all the decisions for it) and allow it to think for itself. The temperament of the dam is often mimicked very closely by the calf. When the cow is bad-mannered, the calf often follows the same behaviour. Weaning allows early intervention to change those habits before it is too late.

A SUGGESTED WEANING SCHEDULE

As suggested above, wean calves that are over 150 kg live-weight. It is possible to wean calves that weigh as low as 120 kg if the quality of feed on offer is improved. Green feed or very good quality hay will improve outcomes in calves weaned at lighter live-weights. Additional high protein/energy concentrate supplements would be necessary for weaning at lower live-weights.

There are many other factors to consider during weaning apart from calf live-weight, such as:

- Time of the year;
- Condition of the dam;
- Availability and cost of good quality feed or supplement;
- Time of mating.

Time of the year

This is important as it relates to the quality of available feed to feed the weaners. It is important to supply good quality feed so that there is no setback in growth rate at this critical stage. Beatrice Hill Farm has several advantages due to its location, which may not be available at other locations, such as good, well-drained upland soils producing fertilised improved pastures, extensive improved floodplain country and floodplain ponded pastures. Such a location reduces the need to worry about time of year for weaning, as it is possible to put weaners on good quality feed at virtually any time of the year. As the farm practises controlled mating, it is possible to wean all calves at one appropriate time, which is around August. This allows the calves to go through weaner training before temperatures get too high. The weaning time is also very close to the first storms so pasture quality will likely improve very soon. There are also options for using ponded pasture which is still green, or using back-up hay if the early wet season fails. The timing also allows cows some recovery time from lactation stress during the hardest time of the year (high temperature and least amount of feed) during late pregnancy.

Condition of the dam

If cows are losing too much body condition due to lactation stress, wean off the calves onto good quality feed. This is particularly important for pregnant cows so that they are in prime condition at calving time. Wean the calves no later than eight to nine months of the cows' gestation to maintain good long-term reproductive rates. However, this will depend very much on feed availability and quality, which are most influenced by stocking rates.

The availability of good quality feed

Green feed is the best option for weaners post-weaning. However under most Top End conditions, this may not be possible. Weaning usually starts in the yards and continues there for some time. Provide nutritionally high quality hay, pellets or cubes. The feed should be attractive enough so that the weaners adapt to it quickly and avoid a decline in their growth rate. Legume hays, such as Cavalcade or well-made Verano, should be good additions to the diet. Access to a grass/legume mixed diet with a high energy and protein content would be preferable. Pangola hay has been regularly used. Ensure that only good quality green grass is used for making hay, as hay can vary considerably in nutritive value depending on the time of cutting, the stage of growth, curing times, leaf losses and fertiliser used. Note that the higher the quality of feed available to the calf at weaning, the higher will be its growth rate. Setbacks to weight gain at this stage should be minimised.

Time of mating

Ideally, there should be a sufficient recovery period between weaning and mating for the cow to regain condition for the next mating and calving. Because of their 305 to 330 day gestation period (depending on breed), calving and mating times in buffalo are usually quite close. The interval between calving and the end of the mating period can be as short as seven weeks under regular controlled mating systems. Note that the better the condition of the cows at calving, the better will be their re-conception rates during the same season. Also, the earlier a calf is weaned, the faster will the cow recover live-weight and condition, triggering cycling to commence early in the mating period. The general recommendation for buffalo is to calve in the early-mid wet so that during lactation nutrition is at its best. In general, where feed is not limiting, buffalo are better able to lactate during the dry season than cattle without great detriment to their body condition. This applies to the swamp breed. However, the condition of the higher milk-producing crossbred or pure riverine cow should be monitored because of its greater potential for weight loss due to its higher milk production. Since a crossbred calf grows faster than a purebred swamp, it can be weaned at the same weight as a purebred swamp, but at a younger age, thereby relieving the pressure on the cow sooner.

STEPS IN THE WEANING PROCESS

1. Securely separate weaners from dams in the yards overnight and return the dams to a paddock as far as possible from the weaners, preferably out of earshot. They will usually require three to five days in the yards for the initial weaning process.
2. Provide water and feed to appetite at all times. Preferably, all hay should be fed off the ground in racks, whilst pellets, cubes or concentrates should be in elevated troughs. Protect grain from birds, otherwise they will consume the best of the energy sources and may leave behind diseases, such as coccidiosis.
3. Treat the weaners for parasites as soon as practicable, particularly lice and/or worms. If lice are present, apply a pour-on lice treatment with a second dose after 18 days. Any parasites should be eliminated immediately to avoid health complications during this period. Because animals are locked up in the yards during weaning, parasites can spread very rapidly and cause weight losses in weaners over a short period of time.
4. Feed weaners twice a day to give them maximum exposure to humans.

5. Interact with weaners in the largest yard, until they are walking and not rushing. The bigger the yard, the easier will this be to achieve because you will be able to walk farther away from the weaners without being restricted by yard panels or fences. Low stress stock handling methods are highly recommended as they will drastically reduce the amount of time needed in the yard to pacify weaners. Once the animals are no longer stressed, they can be trained through the yards and races without impediment. A “free-run” process (all gates are open through the races) gives them confidence in confined spaces. You can also teach them to take pressure. Often this is best carried out by just one person, so that there are no other distractions until weaners are “in hand”. Done properly, the whole weaning process can be achieved within just a few days. The three objectives of the training process is to teach them to stop, walk in a straight line and not to run. Once this has been achieved they can be let out of the yards.
6. Every few days, or every night, weaners can be brought back to the yards for feeding and further training. The essence of the training is such that everything should be carried out at a walking, and never at a running pace. If kept in paddocks close to the yards, weaners should be mustered on foot. Once yard-trained, everything else can be achieved in the paddock, such as exposure to your choice of mustering method: by horse, on bikes or on foot, with the same condition that everything is achieved at a walking pace. Once an animal moves at a faster rate than a walking pace, the stress level increases and its movements become more difficult to predict.
7. The interval between training sessions can be lengthened over time. Practice musters within the paddock can be done on an ad hoc basis when “passing through” just to let the weaners know that they are “still loved”. They should be grouped, then held steady, then moved off in a certain direction and blocked up again. They should always be left in a ‘camped’ position when leaving them; they should be happy to remain where they are put without running off.

This process of weaning will give buffalo weaners the greatest possible benefit for the rest of their lives. They will forever remember the training they received as weaners. The benefits of that training will include greater manageability, tender meat and good behaviour of their progeny. All these factors should improve the profit levels to the owner and more than adequately cover the time invested.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Low Stress Stock Handling Courses. Visit website at www.lss.net.au

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