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UNH Professor Helps African Nations Advance Agriculturally by Teaching about Oxen Use

By Lori Gula
UNH News Bureau

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EDITORS: Drew Conroy can be reached for interviews at his home in Berwick, Maine, at 207-698-4651 or by e-mail at abconroy@hypatia.unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. -- "I was told by a friend, 'once you've been to Africa you will never be cured,'" says University of New Hampshire Professor Drew Conroy.

"When I asked what he meant, his only reply was 'you'll see.' What I have not been cured of is the desire to listen again to the wild sounds of the Africa night or to spend just one more night with my Maasai friends feasting on a roasted goat," Conroy says. "Most of all, I can never learn enough from the farmers and extension agents I work with. While some of the poorest people in the world, they have offered me hospitality and taught me more than I could have learned studying Africa from afar," he says.

Conroy is an animal science professor at UNH's Thompson School of Applied Science. He is the author of "Oxen, a Teamsters Guide (2000)," a book on raising, training, driving and showing oxen. His first book, "The Oxen Handbook (1985)," written when he was a junior at UNH, became a reference for 4-H and adult teamsters.

He has trained individuals on how to use oxen on small farms and in international development. He recently returned from his fifth trip to Africa, a three-week academic adventure through Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.
Conroy attended a week-long international workshop, sponsored by the Animal Traction Network for Eastern and Southern Africa (ATNES). The workshop brought together researchers and experts from more than 20 countries to present, discuss improving agriculture in Uganda, using oxen, donkeys and camels, as well as more environmentally sound methods of cultivation.

Agriculture is a way of life for most people in Africa, yet it is largely low tech and labor intensive -- nothing like the mechanized and computerized farming found in the United States. More than 25 percent of the cultivated land is worked with animal traction, which is expected to spread and become more intensive, according to ATNES.

Animal power is the life-line to food security and reduction of poverty for many communities and countries. Animal power also is a critical resource in transport, with many social and economic benefits. Africa, however, faces general stagnation and/or declining agricultural performance, attributed to the degradation of soil and water. As a result, officials believe a move to conservation agriculture and farming is critical.

In Nairobi, Kenya, Conroy lectured on "Maasai Oxen and Agriculture -- A Case Study of East Africa Pastoralists," at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology. In Tanzania, he was asked by Inyuaat-e-Maa, a Maasai nongovernmental organization in Arusha, to present his work to the African Wildlife Foundation; representatives from the International Livestock Research Institute, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' Livestock Environment and Development Initiative; and VetAid of Tanzania.

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