Foreword

In Europe, total sheep numbers have decreased in the last 15 years, while goats represent only 4% of the world population. International trade in sheep and, especially, goat products is less than that in cattle, pig and poultry products. Nevertheless, research on small ruminants continues to be an important activity in Europe, with a greater part directed to studying the role of sheep and goats in the management of plant ecosystems and landscape maintenance. Another area that has attracted increased interest is the production and marketing of specialist food and fibre products, which attract high prices from discerning customers and can play a role in developing tourism.

In the last 50 years, the Commission on Sheep and Goat Production of the European Association for Animal Production (EAAP) has provided a forum for the discussion of all aspects of small ruminant production. Twenty years ago, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, with the help of EAAP, established a Network on Cooperative Research on Sheep and Goat Production, which is now very actively supported by the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM). One of the most important activities of the FAO-CIHEAM network has been to bring together research workers from Europe, North Africa and the Near East, in a sub-network on Nutrition and Feeding Strategies of Sheep and Goats, which is now coordinated by Inger Ledin, of Sweden.

This sub-network has recently organised two meetings, the INAPG meeting on Nutrition of sheep and goats meeting in Grignon, in France, from 3 to 5 September, 1998, and a session on the Nutrition of Dairy Goats in Intensive Conditions, in the programme of the 50th annual meeting of the EAAP in Zurich, from 22 to 26 August, 1999. It was felt that some of the key presentations at these two meetings should be published in a special issue of Livestock Production Science, to present current information on some aspects of sheep and goat nutrition. This special issue contains two papers on the nutrient requirements of goats, which have been poorly defined in comparison with other species, four papers relating to aspects of plant-animal relationships, including feeding behaviour and the use of pasture or Mediterranean rangelands by small ruminants, and two papers relating to product quality, fat composition of lamb meat and growth of Angora and Cashmere goat fibres.

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