

Locusts and grasshoppers: nutritional value, harvesting and applications

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Introduction

Insects and in particular locusts are often considered a nuisance to human beings and mere pests for crops. It

may be true in situations such as East Africa where locusts have recently caused a huge loss to crops in Ethiopia, Kenya, Eritrea, Uganda, South Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Sudan. Lately, this infestation of desert locusts arrived in East Africa in June 2019, feeding on hundreds of thousands of hectares of crops and pastureland and devastating huge crop and grazing biomasses. For example, an FAO study reports a loss of 356,000 tonnes in cereal crops and pasture reduction of about 40%; and in Kenya locusts destroyed at least 30% of the pastureland. This has adversely affected food security in these countries. Other countries, e.g., India, Pakistan, China, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Iran have also encountered locust-mediated enormous crop losses in the recent



Figure 1. Desert locust swarm in South-Morocco, in 2004.

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past.

In recent times, due to increasing demand of protein for both animals and humans, the use of insects as food and feed has attracted the attention of scientists, feed industry, development workers, and regulatory and safety authorities. Locusts are rich in protein and can be fed to animals a point that has largely been ignored in the locust infested countries. There is a severe deficiency of good quality animal feed, which is one of the major constraints for increasing livestock production in most of the countries affected by locusts. It may also be noted that the environment footprint of locusts is low.

The greenhouse emission (g/kg mass gain) for locusts is about 100 versus 1100 and 2800 for pig and beef respectively.

Locusts and grasshoppers, like most insects, are rich in protein and energy. Fresh insects contain about 25–35% dry matter. The crude protein content is high, usually in the range of 50–65% (dry matter basis), though lower values and higher values are reported. The fat content is quite variable and ranges from relatively low values (< 10%) to high ones (> 30%) (Table 1a and Table 1b).

The crude fibre is in the 8-15% range and corresponds to some extent to chitin, a polysaccharide found in the exoskeleton of insects. The presence of chitin, being a non-protein nitrogen polysaccharide, can cause an overestimation of the protein content when estimated from the mineral nitrogen measured by the usual Kjeldhal or Dumas method and multiplied by 6.25. Protein content may be overestimated by 17% due to presence of chitin.

Composition

Type	Species	DM	CP	CF	Fat	Ash	Ref.
Locusts	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	26.8	61.7		17.9	4.3	1
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	31.0	64.9		18.6	4.0	1
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	28.8	58.2		23.5	3.9	1
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	34.4	58.3		22.7	3.8	1
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	29.1	55.5		24.7	3.7	1
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	34.3	55.5		29.6	3.3	1
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>		50.8		34.9	2.4	2
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	97.6	46.8		35.3	2.3	3
	<i>Locusta migratoria</i>	92.2	53.7		19.4	3.7	3
	<i>Nomadacris septemfasciata</i>	92.0	63.5	13.5	14.1	8.7	4
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i>	94.0	52.3		12.0	10.0	5
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i>	89.5	51.6	14.0	10.9		6
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (commercial)	21.6	60.5	19.9	16.2	0.7	15
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (1 day, female)		63.3				7
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (1 day, male)		52.0				7
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (10 days, female)		57.8				7
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (10 days, male)		52.5				7
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (20 days, female)		40.6				7
	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i> (20 days, male)		47.3				7

Table 1a. Proximal composition of locusts (expressed in % DM)

DM: dry matter, CP: crude protein (N x 6.25), CF: crude fibre

Type	Species	DM	CP	CF	Fat	Ash	Ref.
Grasshoppers	<i>Acrida exaltata</i>		64.5	7.7	7.1	5.0	8
	<i>Acanthacris ruficornis</i>	88.4	66.0		10.2	11.4	14
	<i>Grasshopper mix*</i>	90.1	77.9	9.9	7.4	4.7	9
	<i>Hieroglyphus banian</i>		63.6	7.2	7.2	4.9	8
	<i>Kraussaria angulifera</i>	91.0	71.1		12.9	8.3	14
	<i>Oxya fuscovittata</i>		64.0	7.5	6.5	5.0	8
	<i>Spathosternum prasiniferum</i>		65.9	7.0	8.1	5.1	8
	<i>Zonocerus variegatus</i>		61.5		6.9	4.3	10
	<i>Zonocerus variegatus</i>		58.0	12.4	15.5	2.9	11
	<i>Zonocerus variegatus</i>				9.1		12
Katydid	<i>Anabrus simplex</i>	93.8	60.0	9.8	12.9	6.9	13
	<i>Anabrus simplex</i>	93.7	56.0	8.2	19.9	5.4	13
	<i>Anabrus simplex</i>	94.0	57.7	7.6	12.4	9.0	13

Table 1b. Proximal composition of grasshoppers (expressed in % DM)

Grasshopper mix* = *Acrida lata*, *Atractomorpha bedeli*, *Oxya japonica*, *Gampsocleis buergeri*

DM: dry matter, CP: crude protein (N x 6.25), CF: crude fibre

The essential amino acid composition of locusts and grasshoppers is reasonably good, but generally inferior to that of traditional protein-rich ingredients such as soybean meal and fish meal (Table 2). This is notably the case for lysine and sulphur amino acids. Tryptophan content seems relatively high. However, information is lacking on the variability of the amino acid profile of acridid protein, so conclusions are difficult to draw.

Insects contain relatively little ash compared to other animal products such as fish meal, so their content in individual minerals is low, particularly in calcium and magnesium, while sodium content is much higher than in plant-based feeds.

As animal feed

Despite their good nutritional value and long-time use as human food, there is limited information about feeding locusts and grasshoppers to animals, and only for pigs, poultry, and fish. Generally, these insects can replace part of the protein sources in monogastric species, but performance decreases when the inclusion rate increases. This is likely caused by the lower quality of their protein, which itself can be overestimated due to the presence of chitin.



Figure 2. Desert locust close-up. Photo credit: Michael Linnenbach, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

Pigs

In Eastern Africa, dried red locusts (*Nomadacris septemfasciata*) fed to pigs in a mixed diet (20% protein) resulted in a satisfactory growth rate, but the fresh meat and bacon had a definite fishy taint. Removal of the locust meal from the diet three weeks prior to slaughter reduced the taint but did not completely eliminate it.

Type	Locusts		Grasshoppers				Katydids	Soybean meal	Fish meal
Species	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i>	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i>	<i>Grasshopper mix</i>	<i>Zonocerus variegatus</i>	<i>Zonocerus variegatus</i>	<i>Zonocerus variegatus</i>	<i>Anabrus simplex</i>		
Reference	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	8
Lysine	5.9	4.3	3.8	5.7	4.8	3.4	6.2	6.2	7.5
Threonine	4.0	4.8	2.4	4.0	3.1	2.9	4.8	3.8	4.1
Methionine	2.3	1.0	1.0	2.0	1.9	2.3	1.3	1.4	2.7
Cystine	1.7	0.5	0.5	1.6	0.7	0.5	0.1	1.6	0.9
Tryptophan				1.8		0.8	0.5	1.4	1.0
Isoleucine	4.1	3.6	2.9	4.2	3.7	3.9	5.3	4.6	4.1
Valine	3.8	7.4	4.4	3.4	3.5	4.3	6.0	4.8	5.0
Leucine	5.9	6.8	5.6	5.1	5.1	5.6	8.6	7.6	7.2
Phenylalanine	4.5	2.9	2.3	4.5	3.1	2.3	2.8	5.1	3.9
Tyrosine	3.1	6.9	3.9	2.9	2.5	3.6	6.2	3.5	3.0
Histidine	4.2	2.2	1.6	4.2	3.9	1.9	3.3	2.7	2.5
Arginine	7.4	4.7	3.7	7.3	6.1	3.7	4.5	7.3	6.2
Alanine	5.1	11.6	9.1	5.2	3.7	4.1		4.4	6.3
Aspartic acid	9.4	6.6	5.1	9.2	8.2			11.3	9.1
Glutamic acid	15.4	10.0	7.0	15.3	13.4			17.8	12.6
Glycine	4.8	6.8	4.7	4.7	4.5	4.7		4.2	6.7
Serine	5.0	4.0	2.7	5.2	4.7			4.7	3.9
Proline	3.8		2.1	3.9	4.3	2.1		5.0	4.3

Table 2. Amino acids in locusts and grasshoppers (expressed in g/16 g N)

Poultry

Direct predation. Birds are natural predators for locusts and grasshoppers. A chicken can eat up to 70 insects per day and a duck can eat up to 200. In China, large bands of chickens or ducks, nicknamed “armies” in the medias where such flocks are shown marching from one area to another, are used to prevent or control outbreaks. In the Philippines, free-range chickens fed on grasshoppers were found to taste better and had a higher market price than those fed on conventional commercial feed. In the Tibetan Plateau, free-range chickens reared on grassland containing a large population of grasshoppers had lower live weights, breast, wing, thigh and drum weights, and higher dressing percentage and breast percentage, compared with chickens fed a soybean meal-maize diet. The meat from free-range grasshopper-fed broilers had less cholesterol and higher concentrations of total lipid and phospholipids as well as more antioxidative potential and a longer shelf life.

Broilers. Workers have tried to replace part of fish meal with locust and grasshopper meal and found that such partial substitution is generally suitable. In Nigeria, broilers (1-28 days old) given desert locust meal (*Schistocerca gregaria*) to replace 50% of the protein from fish meal (1.7% of the total diet) gave better body weight gain, feed intake and feed conversion ration. In China, meal from the grasshopper *Acrida cinerea* replaced 20% and 40% fish meal in broiler diets with similar growth rates and feed consumption as the control diet. In Nigeria, grasshopper meal included at 2.5 to 7.5% in broiler (1-49 days old) diets depressed weight gain and feed efficiency, though it increased the protein content of the carcass. In another study, grasshopper meal included at 2.5% of the diet was found to be a suitable and cheap substitute for imported fish meal.

Japanese quail. In India, Japanese quails (*Coturnix japonica japonica*) were fed with various diets in which grasshopper meal (*Oxya hyla*) gradually replaced fish meal. The best results were obtained with the diet in

which 50% of the fish meal was replaced with Oxya meal. Fecundity was significantly higher, compared with the control treatment.

Fish

Catfish. Desert locust meal (*Schistocerca gregaria*) was used to substitute up to 25% of the dietary protein in African catfish *Clarias gariepinus* juveniles without a significant reduction in growth. Excess chitin may have contributed to reducing performance and feed efficiency when higher substitution rates were used. Meal of variegated grasshopper (*Zonocerus variegatus*) replaced up to 25% fish meal in the diets of *Clarias gariepinus* without any effect on growth and nutrient utilization. Higher inclusion rates decreased digestibility and performance.

Nile tilapia. Migratory locust meal (*Locusta migratoria*) replaced fish meal up to 25% in the diets of Nile tilapia fingerlings (*Oreochromis niloticus*) without any adverse effect on the nutrient digestibility, growth performance and haematological parameters.

Potential constraints as animal feed

Pesticides and contaminants. Due to their status as agricultural pests, locusts and grasshoppers

may be sprayed with insecticides in governmental control programmes or by farmers, resulting in significant amounts of residues in consumed insects. These risks are of major concern in the traditional practices of harvesting and consuming insects in the wild, where the control of chemical applications is difficult. In Kuwait, after the outbreak of 1988/89, high concentrations of residues of organophosphorus pesticides were detected in locusts collected for food. Similar such examples have been reported from Korea and Mali.

Bioaccumulation of lead in chapulines grasshoppers (*Sphenarium*) from the tailings of Mexican silver mines is suspected to have caused an outbreak of lead poisoning in 2000 in California after people consumed the insects. Accumulation of cadmium could also take place from biomass used by locusts.

In a study in Russia, the locusts produced were dried using a system called “extruder vector” that dried locust bodies by heat and pressure and destroyed all harmful bacteria. Heat and pressure treatment could eliminate the risk of microbial contamination. As for any nutrient-rich feed or food resources, improper storage of locusts postharvest, for example in contaminated containers and/or in moist conditions may lead to fungal growth and risk of mycotoxins.

Spines. The presence of large spines on the tibia of locusts and grasshoppers may cause intestinal



Figure 3. Woman catching 'chapulines' with a basket in Mexico

Photo credit : Joaquín Murguía-González, CC BY-NC 4.0 international.

constipation, which has been shown to be fatal in monkeys in the wild, and this has occasionally required surgery in humans. Grinding or removing the legs and wings is therefore recommended prior to consumption.

Harvesting

Harvesting locusts and grasshoppers as food or feed is a biological control method that may help reducing the use of pesticides and thus environmental pollution. In Mexico, hand-picking *chapulines* grasshoppers (*Sphenarium* spp.) that infest alfalfa fields decreased environmental damage, while generating an extra source of nutrition and income from the consumption and sale of grasshoppers. In Thailand, the outbreak of patanga locust (*Patanga succincta*) in maize in the late 1970s led to a campaign to promote the eating of this locust, which is now farmed for food purposes.

In addition to direct predation by domestic birds described in the poultry section, three types of methods are used to harvest locusts and grasshoppers: manual catching, static traps, and mobile traps. Harvesting is generally done at dusk, at night or at dawn when the insects are less mobile or fly more slowly or close to the ground. Locusts and grasshoppers are particularly vulnerable in the early morning when they are still numbed by the cold. It is important to note that collecting these insects for food and feed should never be done when pesticides are used. Pesticide-contaminated locusts and grasshoppers, when harvested, should only be used in composting. Other non-chemical control methods are frightening and preventing the insects from landing. Details on harvesting methods can be obtained from our review listed at the end.



Figure 4. Static catching device in Uganda. Photo credit: Atuhaire, P., BBC, Copyright (2018), reproduced with permission.

Other uses

Locusts sprayed with pesticides could be used for composting, which could be used as a fertilizer after ensuring that the composted product is free of pesticides. During composting pesticides would get degraded to innocuous products. Locusts are rich in chitin, which can be used as a probiotics. Chitin is also known to bind dietary lipids including triglycerides and can be exploited for treatment of hyper-cholesterol in blood. Furthermore, locust oil is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, suggesting their potential use for preventing coronary heart diseases. Locusts could have a number of industrial uses including production of bioplastics and bioactive proteins and peptides.

Conclusion and way forward

Locusts and grasshoppers are crop and pasture destroyers. However, their use as animal feed could be one of the strategies to convert this species of '*mass destruction*' to a '*resource*'. The crude protein content of locusts and grasshoppers is high, usually in the range of 50–65% in dry matter basis, with reasonably good essential amino acid composition. Those insects can replace approximately 25% of the conventional protein sources (e.g., soymeal and fish meal) in the diets of poultry, pigs and fish. Addition of locusts that replaces 50% and beyond of conventional protein sources is also possible, especially in commercial production system, if supplemented with synthetic essential amino acids which are easily available at a low cost these days. This is expected to decrease cost of feed production and increase profit to farmers, in addition to decreasing carbon footprint of animal source foods.

For making locusts and grasshoppers as a mainstream feed resource, rearing approaches need upscaling, and the harvesting techniques need adaptation to specific conditions. The locust infestations do not take place every year and not last long, implying that availability of locusts is irregular and for a short duration. Another option would be harvesting of grasshoppers that have stable population levels and can be supplied in substantial amounts at a regular interval. Nevertheless, smallholder farmers can use ground locusts as a feed supplement to the diets they normally feed to their livestock, which is deficient in protein in most of the

cases. This would lead to increase in livestock production and productivity. The grinding of the locusts or grasshoppers using a locally made simple grinding machine may be possible at a cooperative or farmers' group level in a village. Capacity building activities on safe feeding of locusts and grasshoppers need promotion.

Currently, use of insecticides is considered to be an efficient approach for controlling the locusts, but use of pesticides has been shown to cause severe damage to the environment and inhabiting biological life including animals, humans, aquatic system and other insects including the beneficial ones. An integrated control approach (along with use of insecticides) wherein harvesting of locusts for use as food or feed also becomes an important strategy, would decrease use of pesticides and their associated negative effects. In such an integrated approach, the identification of the pesticide status of wild insects would be necessary to ensure the safety of their consumption. The will and participation of stakeholders (NGOs and departments that deal with emergencies) involved in controlling locusts using insecticides is required to make the best use of locusts as livestock feed. The people should be educated on collection of only live locusts for use as animal feed, and the dead ones could be used for composting. Capacity building of farmers and provision of information on the adverse effects of dead locusts after insecticide spray to animals and humans would help in the safe use of locusts. Also local people can be informed by the concerned department if the locusts in their areas have been sprayed with insecticides or not. Insecticide-free locusts and grasshoppers could be used as animal feed or human food, while insects sprayed with pesticides may be used for compost making. Institutional and policy support would be required to achieve this. Capacity building and advance preparation of the locust control emergency units towards use of the integrated approach that also considers use of locusts as animal feed would be a triple-win for the smallholder farmers, the environment, and human and animal health. A concern has also been raised that people actively collecting the locusts during the night (when locust settle) puts them at risk either from wildlife or from other rural population. A community-based approach and communication of the advantages of locust harvesting to the community: crop and pasture

protection, and prevention of animal and human health deterioration as a result of insecticide spray would help in overcoming resistance by the rural population. Locust harvesting if takes place by using light and sound would deter wild animal from coming near to the people collecting the locusts. Alternatively, collection can be done in the mornings when the locusts are numb.

The information provided here in brief along with that available in our detailed review (reference given below) would help the countries in preparedness to make the best use of a resource generated due to arrival of 'uninvited guests', to enhance food security and create business opportunities.

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