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Y. Zhang

China Agricultural University, China

Y. Togamura

National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science, Japan

K. Otsuki

National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science, Japan

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Using the n-alkane technique to estimate the herbage intake and diet composition of cattle grazing a *Miscanthus sinensis* grassland

Y. Zhang¹, Y. Togamura² and K. Otsuki²

¹Animal Science and Technology College, China Agricultural University, West Road 2 Yuan Ming Yuan, Beijing, P.R. China 100094, Email: zhangyj@cau.edu.cn, ²National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science, Senbenmatsu, Nishinasuno, Tochigi, Japan 329-2793

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Introduction Plant wax alkanes are now widely used as marker substances (Dove & Mayes 1991) for the estimation of forage intake and diet composition of grazing herbivores. The objective of this study was to evaluate this method with cattle grazing a *M. sinensis* grassland in Japan.

Materials and methods Four cattle were continuously stocked on the grassland from 28 July to 24 August. The sward consisted of 85% *M. sinensis*, 5% *Pleiablastus chino* and 10% *Aralia elata* and *Lespedeza bicolor*. Animals were dosed with a controlled release device capsule (CaptecTM, New Zealand). Faecal samples of individual animals were taken once daily by hand, immediately after faecal excretion on the ground. Meanwhile, herbage samples of each species were hand plucked. Alkane concentrations were determined in the samples as described by Zhang *et al.* (2002). The proportion of each species consumed were calculated using the software package 'Eatwhat' (Dove & Moore, 1995). The alkane concentrations in the diet were corrected using the proportions of the pasture species and the alkane concentrations in each species. Herbage intake was calculated on the basis of the C₃₃/C₃₂ ratio using the equation described by Dove & Mayes (1991).

Results The animals had consumed 10 - 40% *P. chino* and 3 - 12% *L. bicolor* each day. Average DM intakes ranged from 1.6 - 2.3% of live weight (MBW) and were significantly ($P < 0.05$) related to the change in body weight (Table 1).

Table 1 Daily herbage intake on *M. sinensis* grassland

Animal	MBW (kg)	Daily herbage intake (kg) Mean ±SD	DMI as % of body weight	Change in body weight (kg/day)
1	388.5	6.17±1.02	1.59	0.04
2	523.5	11.74±0.55	2.24	0.78
3	385	8.69±0.71	2.26	0.22
4	418.5	6.98±1.04	1.67	-0.19

MBW: mean body weight over a 27 days period; SD: standard deviation.

Conclusions The relative proportions of the different species in the diet was successfully estimated using the alkane technique. Using the diet composition correction, herbage intake of *M. sinensis* grassland can be successfully determined.

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