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Donkey Breeds in Europe

The study undertaken by the SAVE Monitoring Institute "Donkey Breeds in Europe" provides an overview of the current situation of the domesticated species "donkey" in Europe. First investigations were done in 1997/1998, which has now been updated and extended. Extensive literature and internet research was followed by surveys sent to all the relevant institutions and organisations. Along with origin, domestication and use, particular value was placed on the current distribution and situation in European countries.

The origin of the donkey was the African wild donkey. Donkeys were already domesticated in North Africa between 8 and 9'000 years ago. 4'000 years ago, donkeys were introduced to Spain and Italy via Morocco. The Romans distributed the donkey further over the Alps and to northern and Eastern Europe. There has been little change in use of the donkey since their first domestication: today donkeys are still primarily used as draught, pack and riding animals. Variety in the development of the body depends on the region, the way they are kept, the climate and breeding. There are comparatively few pedigree breeds. Often the breeds are not clearly defined, as is the case with other domesticated species. Furthermore, the breeding basis of the donkey breeds is relatively small, which increases the danger of inbreeding.

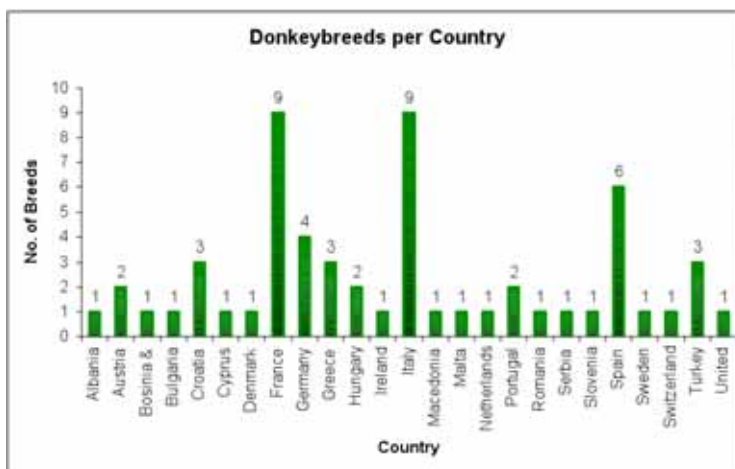
Due to their modest needs, resistance to disease, stamina and pleasant nature, donkeys have been particularly valued. Donkey meat is only consumed in a few countries in Europe. The albumin rich milk is particularly suitable for special dietary needs. It contains more sugar and protein than cow's milk. As a niche product, donkey milk is receiving more attention. Cosmetics are also being made from donkey milk and are to be found as a niche product in Italy and France. Donkey leather was formerly used to make parchment. The breeding of mules from horse mares and donkey jacks to create robust work animals is rare these days. Due to this the giant donkeys, bred for mule breeding are now critically endangered.



The tasks traditionally performed by a donkey are being replaced by machines. Medicine, therapy, hobby as well as meat and milk production provide small niches for a few breeds. The stock numbers of donkeys are sinking globally; In Europe this trend is dramatic. In south European countries, donkeys are kept by an aging population, which is a factor in reducing stock numbers and the younger generations often rid themselves of donkeys at the first opportunity. Fortunately, the last years have seen an increase in interest in keeping donkeys as hobby and leisure animals in northern and central Europe. Friends of the donkey have organised clubs together. Breed selection and pedigree breeding however, rarely takes place and crossbreeds are generally to be found.

Results

In 24 countries, 58 breeds or varieties of donkey were identified. In nearly all countries an unspecific „common donkey“ was listed. This was particularly in those countries with



a tradition of donkey keeping such as Bulgaria or Greece. In Greece alone, the stock of donkeys fell in the last 50 years by 96%. The majority of donkey breeds were to be found in France, Italy and Spain. However, the numbers per breeds tended to be under 500 animals, according to the FAO criteria considered endangered. Only the Dinaric donkey and the Burro de Miranda in Portugal have more than 1'000 individuals.

Difficulties are created for the keeping and breeding of donkeys by the fact that they are often not state recognised as a farm animal, because of this, no subsidies can be claimed for keeping them. The economic interest in donkey keeping is low. Only very few donkey breeds can be used for the niche markets of therapy or milk production, trekking or leisure. These activities and products are mainly found in the more affluent regions, less so on the "donkey rich" countries of South and South Eastern Europe.

A difference in the way the donkeys are kept can also be found: influenced by cultural, economic and emotional interests, the animals are often looked after badly or incorrectly.



Facts and Need for Action:

- Donkeys are endangered as a species in Europe
- The knowledge of breeds and breed descriptions is being lost
- Knowledge about keeping, care and use is low
- The bad image of the donkey needs to be improved
- Public awareness needs to be raised about the species donkey
- Research and monitoring needs to be encouraged
- State support for non-state activity is essential
- Standardisation of breeds and varieties where needed.

Measures

So that donkeys can regain their status as a valued companion to humankind the following measures are needed:

- Structured conservation programmes must be initiated
- Experts need to be linked cross-border
- Public awareness has to be raised
- Farms and stations: donkey keeping needs to be networked and interested people should have access to information through, for example the Ark Network (www.arca-net.info).

SAVE Foundation and the Monitoring Institute will continue to work towards the conservation of donkeys, to initiate the implementation of the above measures, to support and coordination.

The complete study can be downloaded: <http://www.save-foundation.net/pdf/donkey.pdf>
We thank all persons involved in the study for the fruitful collaboration.

The study was made possible by the support of:

- Werner Stamm Found. for the Conservation of Rare Equines, Oberwil BL, Switzerland
- Margarethe & Rudolf Gsell Foundation, Basel, Switzerland
- Bristol Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland

ECPGR Phase VIII sets the scene for the establishment of a European Collection

- Extract from the official report from the ECPGR secretariat with some additional comments from the NGO-representative, Béla Bartha, ProSpecieRara in Switzerland (bullet points).

The eleventh meeting of the Steering Committee (SC) of ECPGR took place in Sarajevo, September 2008. The meeting was attended by representatives of 34 member countries and observers from three potential member countries; FAO, the Global Crop Diversity Trust, the Secretariat of the Governing Body of the International Treaty, NordGen, SEEDNet and a representative of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also participated.



High on the agenda of the meeting was the adoption by the SC of the Strategic Framework of the European Genebank Integrated System (AEGIS) as a guiding policy document. During ECPGR Phase VIII (2009-2013), the concept of a European Collection will be put into practice. This Collection will be composed of accessions that each member country will commit to maintaining in the long-term, under agreed standards, and to making available under the terms and conditions of the Standard Material Transfer Agreement of the International Treaty. At the discretion of the members, accessions that are plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, as well as medicinal and ornamental plants, will be eligible to be registered as European Accessions. The European Collection is a new concept of "virtual genebank" and its accessions are expected to remain in the respective holding institutions.

- On this point I want to stress that collections held by NGOs could be integrated in the system (AEGIS, International Treaty) as well. But every NGO has to negotiate with their official country representatives under which conditions their collection will be submitted to the International Treaty. Of course the NGO will remain listed as the original provider of the submitted variety.

Parallel to the start of the process for a formal establishment of AEGIS, all the ECPGR Crop Working Groups will be engaged in the identification of Most Appropriate Accessions to be registered as part of the European Collection, as well as in the definition of agreed minimum standards for conservation and setting up of crop conservation work plans. A specific budget line dedicated to AEGIS activities will be available for the Networks under a competitive grant scheme and this opportunity is expected to facilitate the establishment of the European Collection and the management of the Accessions.

- NGOs that provide varieties to the national AEGIS system should ensure that they profit from characterization programs as well. Perhaps there is a possibility that they would be funded by the national programs (NAP) within the countries they are active.

Apart from task sharing and capacity building, other priority areas for ECPGR activity during Phase VIII will also continue to be addressed, e.g. "Characterization and evaluation", "In situ and on-farm conservation and management" and "Documentation & information". Two new Working Groups, namely the WG on "Wild species conservation in genetic reserves" and the WG on "On-farm conservation and management" were specifically established for this purpose, raising the number of ECPGR Working Groups in Phase VIII to 20.

- Within the working groups the collaboration with NGOs is very much needed and welcomed and NGOs are invited to participate within this groups. Interested NGOs are invited to contact the European representative (bela.bartha@prospecierara.ch) and they will be informed about the next group-meetings. Alternatively, they could contact their national coordinators, see: <http://tinyurl.com/6qjozq>. The participation has to be on self-financed level. In very special cases participants can ask for financial support.

In the documentation and information area, ECPGR will collaborate with a global project funded by three international bodies (Global Crop Diversity Trust, International Treaty and Bioversity International). This project, called GIGA (Global Information on Germplasm Accessions), intends to create, among other things, a gateway to accession level information.

For the full report see: <http://tinyurl.com/6q8qfs>

Workshop “Shorthorn cattle of the Balkans”, Pogradec, Albania

From 11th to 13th of September 2008, SAVE Monitoring Institute conducted an international workshop on autochthonous Shorthorn cattle of the Balkans, in cooperation with its Albanian Partner organization ALBAGENE in Pogradec, Albania. This cattle type is called Busha, Busa, Illyric or Brachyceros cattle in the Balkans. Concept ideas and minimum requirements for the conservation of autochthonous breeds in the Balkans were to be discussed, using the example of “Busha cattle.” Networking between the three pillars of conservation work (governmental sector, research and universities, and breeders and representatives of NGOs) stood in the fore of the event. This is particularly important in the Balkans as there are many reservations between often very hierarchical structures that considerably obstruct conservation activities.



Fortunately, more than 30 representatives of the three above mentioned sectors of conservation work from nearly all Balkan States participated in the event. Short reports and results from studies that participants had sent already before the event were made available for all participants in the Internet for their individual preparation. Still, the direct exchange about progress, problems, news and results from studies and projects proved to be very important. Since the last workshop of the Balkans network in Pernik 2006 (cf. SAVE eNews 2006), diverse efforts for the *in-situ* conservation of autochthonous Shorthorn cattle have been undertaken. The awareness of the importance of those breeds has been rising in many places, as well as the interest in scientific studies concerning the matter.

Genetic analyses of 8 different Shorthorn cattle breeds of the Balkans have shown a high polymorphism in the studied Busha populations whilst having a similar genetic structure, whereby Prespa Busha cattle showed the longest branch of highest diversity. It is essential to keep the broad genetic diversity of Busha populations by means of appropriate breeding programs alive. The cross-national cooperative exchange of information and know-how plays an important role in this context.

There are indeed many „white spots“ and therefore unknown areas such as e.g. necessary Monitoring Measures in individual countries and regions, uncertainties as regards subsidies and lack of knowledge of animal keepers about the importance of the rare genetic resources they keep and manage in their day-to day business. Many animal keepers have only very limited awareness and knowledge on the conservation of animal genetic resources at all. It is particularly problematic that many keepers own just one or two animals themselves, that communal sire keeping is practiced only seldom and that cross-breeding is a daily occurrence. Governmental subsidies for keepers are often only paid under the condition that at least 10 animals are kept.

The following core statements were made

The Balkans network is to be continued and strengthened

- Regular meetings of the three pillars of conservation work: breeders, government, research
- Network for the in-situ conservation of autochthonous Shorthorn cattle
 - Establishment of a homepage for autochthonous Shorthorn cattle on the Balkans
 - List of stakeholders (actors and representative of relevant groups)
 - Identification and evaluation in the individual countries
 - Listing of individual activities (where is who doing what)
 - Guidelines
 - breed standards
 - animal management standards
 - breeding guidelines
 - Knowledge transfer and public relation
 - Collection of traditional knowledge on animal keeping and animal breeding
 - Distribution of „Best practice“
 - Database / herdbook / exchange of breeding material
 - Further studies on genetic distance are necessary
 - Support of breeding organisations
- For promotion and knowledge distribution, printed flyers with descriptions and „best practice“ guidelines should be developed, for farmers as well as for the broader public.
- Breeding exhibitions should be conducted at national and, later on, at international level.

In the village of Ligenas at Lake Prespa, cattle typical for this region could be observed on-site. Realization, problems and successes of the Albanian ``GEF Small Grant Project`` and the future of the Albanian Prespa Cattle in Ligenas were discussed.



ELBARN Questionnaire

ELBARN, the European Livestock Breeds Ark and Rescue Net, is a pan-European project. The ELBARN Network will be spread throughout Europe to share knowledge and encourage collaboration between organisations and institutes wishing to conserve European animal genetic resources. It will document, in the form of an online database, all places that already exist and can be used as “Ark and Rescue Centres”. It will also encourage the founding of new Ark and Rescue Centres. These Centres will:

- keep core breeding groups
- as well as offer breeding help for livestock keepers and
- also offer a place for the public to see the animal genetic resources of Europe
- offer emergency places for endangered genetically important livestock.
- Marketing of products and services is an integral part of the project.

The ELBARN fact finding questionnaire is now available to be filled in. With this questionnaire a detailed survey of the status quo in each European country is being made. The questions range from questions about regulations and breed registers to questions about marketing programmes and the locations of possible “Ark Centres”. The answers received will be collated, analysed and put online for public view on the ELBARN website www.elbarn.net.

The questionnaire does not take long to fill in – you can fill it in online (English) here: <http://tinyurl.com/5gy33n>. It is also available to download in many European languages here: <http://tinyurl.com/59tjzd>. If you have any questions about the survey please contact the SAVE Head Office at office@save-foundation.net or Tel: +49-7531/802 73 74.

Newsflash

A breed is a breed, if enough people say it is

Breeds can not be defined really in a scientific way. That's why FAO formerly accepted “a breed is a breed, if enough people say it is”. Under the pressure of some scientists then this simple and politically plausible definition was abandoned. Now the pendulum swings back: In the edition from 27 July 2008 of “GlobalDiv” a reputable geneticist comes back to the old formula: A breed is a breed, if enough people say it is.

Link: <http://www.globaldiv.eu/Newsletter.htm>

Agricultural Biodiversity Weblog

Separated by half a world but united by their passion for agricultural biodiversity and the internet, Luigi Guarino and Jeremy Cherfas decided to create a space that would allow them to indulge their passions and maybe do some good. The aim is to collect in one place anything found on the internet that relates somehow to the notion of agricultural biodiversity. If that helps others to find things of interest, so much the better.

Luigi Guarino and Jeremy Cherfas are both professionally involved in biodiversity but the blog is an entirely private affair for which they alone are responsible. They welcome contributions, either as comments to the items on the website, or as a direct message.

This blog can be found at <http://agro.biodiver.se/>

ERFP Meeting Vilnius

SAVE Foundations Elli Broxham gave a presentation on the role of NGOs in conservation of animal genetic resources relating to the Global Plan of Action at a meeting of the European National Coordinators on animal genetic resources in Vilnius, Lithuania, on August 21, 2008 (=> http://www.save-foundation.net/docu/en/GPA_and_NGOs.pdf).

League for Pastoral People (Evelyn Mathias) gave a presentation at the same meeting on the role of livestock keepers in the conservation of farm animal diversity and the Global Plan of Action (see: http://www.pastoralpeoples.org/docs/lk_in_gpa.pdf).

Also the ELBARN project was presented to the National Coordinators in Vilnius on 23 August 2008: http://www.rfp-europe.org/files/8_broxham_ELBARN%20Vilnius.pdf

"LIFE on the farm: Supporting environmentally sustainable agriculture in Europe "

This LIFE-Focus brochure covers a broad range of innovative solutions co-financed by the LIFE programme to help enhance agriculture's influence on the environment. Featuring sustainable agriculture projects active in the fields of water and soil protection, biodiversity and waste, EMAS and Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), as well as the processing of agricultural products, this publication showcases practical examples of ways of dealing with present and future environmental challenges.

Download the brochure from: <http://tinyurl.com/64chh5>

Important dates (extract)

11 November: Conference "Conservation of plant varieties – regulations for Switzerland and Europe" (simultaneous translation German-French) in Berne, Switzerland. Contact: catherine.gosteli@cpc-skek.ch

15-16 November: 8th International Meeting on Pomology; Regensburg, Bavaria/Germany. Contact: josef.wittmann@gmx.de

2009:

23-24 March: "Heritage Care through Active Citizenship", European Conference on Civil Society Organisations active in the Field of Heritage. At Mechelen, Belgium. Web: <http://www.heritageorganisations.eu>

14-16 May: Conference "Challenges of the Balkan Animal Industry and the Role of Science and Co-operation" at Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. Contact: af@uni-sz.bg

12-16 July : IALE Conference 2009: "European Landscapes in Transformation: Challenges for Landscape Ecology and Management", Salzburg, Austria. Contact: secretariat@iale2009.eu; Web: <http://www.iale2009.eu/>

20-23 August: Annual Meeting of SAVE Foundation and the SAVE Network at Gent, Belgium. Visit of the EU institutions in Brussels and the Living Heritage Expo of the Belgian partner organisation SLE (see next line). Contact: info@monitoring.eu.com



23 August: 12th Rare Breeds Expo in the "Living Heritage Park" in the Provincial Domain Puyenbroeck in Wachtebeke, near Gent, Belgium. All Belgian rare breeds will be present. Contact: staf.vandenbergh@skynet.be, Web: <http://www.sle.be>