

The Cross with the Donkeys



Free ranging Donkeys in Biokovo Nature Park, Croatia. Source: SAVE

For thousands of years, donkeys have been faithful companions to humankind. They play an important role in mythology and religion, especially at Christmas time. Yet, our faithful companion is endangered. The population numbers of donkeys in Europe—but also worldwide—continues to decline. It is estimated that there are still 50 million donkeys globally. The majority of the donkeys is domesticated and live as draught or pack animals in the countries of the global south. For example, in China, which has a 4,000-year history of donkey husbandry, there are more than 9 million of them, around 22% of the world's donkey population. The African wild donkey is with having only 200 individuals highly endangered. Asian wild donkeys are classified as vulnerable with a population of around 28,000 animals.

Donkey populations in Europe

Since 1997/1998, the SAVE Foundation is concerned with the donkey breeds in Europe. Origin, domestication, current distribution and use of the donkey breeds were studied and published on http://www.agrobiodiversity.net/topic_network/donkey/breedatlas_donkey.asp, which is freely accessible to the general public. 2007/2008, 58 donkey breeds were recorded in 24 European countries. In a further step, the use of them in Europe was examined.

Country	Pop 2008	Pop 2020	+/- in %
Albania	67600	55996	-17.20%
Austria	2000	2000	0%
Belgium	800	8010	+900%
Bosnia Herzegovina	180000	180000	0%
Bulgaria	185744	35000	-81.20%
Croatia	3800	2540	-34.30%
Cyprus (Greek)	2700	80	-97.10%
Denmark	5000	5000	0%
Finland	?	400	
France	40000	11996	-70.10%
Germany	7000	12092	+72.70%
Greece	21000	40	-99.81%
Hungary	3000	30	-99%
Ireland	2300	2300	0%
Italy	3000	4775	+59.10%
Luxembourg	413	303	-26.70%
Macedonia	?	47	
Malta	100	50	-50%
Montenegro	380	220	-42.20%
Netherlands	916	6210	+577.90%
Portugal	1284	813	-47.70%
Romania	40000	40000	0%
Serbia	1000	567	-43.30%
Slovenia	26	40	+53.8%
Spain	7500	2572	-65.80%
Sweden	450	404	-11.30%
Switzerland	5000	5000	0%
Turkey	329475	126912	-61.5%
United Kingdom	8722	7000	-19.8%
Total	919210	510397	-44.5%

Donkey Populations in Europe in comparison 2008 and 2020. Source: SAVE

animals. A more recent innovative product is the use of donkey manure (see SAVE eNews 02/2020) in combination with pigeon manure for viticulture or gardening.

As former desert dwellers, donkeys have a different metabolism than horses. Therefore, they are very good feed-users. As a result, they are increasingly finding a niche in nature and landscape conservation of dry steppe biotopes (see SAVE eNews 02/2019). Their character traits such as patience, endurance and sociability are making donkeys increasingly popular as therapy animals. At the hands of the uses in niche markets the reputation of the donkey as a loyal, helpful and useful animal is at least rising again. It remains to be hoped that with the usage of new niches the breeding and preservation will also be taken into consideration. In the survey 2020, it has been established that the donkey breeds which were already listed 10 years ago still exist.

Currently, 70 breed occurrences in 30 European countries are mapped on the internet platform mentioned above. However, it is essential to bear in mind that there is still a low differentiation into breeds. The "common donkey" respectively "commune" is still widespread. In 2020, SAVE did another Europe-wide survey. Although the number of registered breeds per country has remained constant, the data collected show that even in Europe the downward trend could not be stopped since 2008. The population numbers have been cut in half even though the conservation efforts have intensified in some countries. In addition, genetic testing concerning characterisation and diversity has been undertaken recently. Donkeys are as an animal species currently higher endangered than they were 12 years ago! In Turkey, the population numbers of donkeys have been halved in the last ten years. In Bulgaria, the decrease even reached up to 90%! No amount of hobby farming can compensate for this decline.

Attention and usage of niches

The attention for the animal species donkey has increased in the northern and western European countries since it enjoys great prestige as a recreational animal. Nevertheless, the interest in breeding is still little. Appealing books and publications draw attention to the donkey as a faithful companion. The use of donkey milk as a medicinal or cosmetic product has become a growing market niche, particularly in the Balkans. Admittedly, there are major questions regarding husbandry and breeding strategies as this invariably requires the production of young

A donkey is not a horse

Nonetheless, the knowledge about the features of the donkey is still limited: donkeys are not horses with long ears! Due to its appearance alone, the donkeys can be easily distinguished from horses by their long ears, the lighter and shorter coat around the eyes and the mouth, the short standing mane and the tail that resembles a rod. Donkeys do not have a protective underfur like horses. They are, therefore, more sensitive regarding wetness and coldness. Their hooves are more upright, smaller, resilient and elastic. Donkeys are also more sure-footed than horses. Moreover, they have one lumbar vertebra less. The jugular vein of the donkey is covered with a skin muscle in the middle third. This influences veterinary treatments as well as larger but fewer blood cells. Donkeys have 62 chromosomes whereas a horse has 64.

Genetic studies

In recent years, scientific studies on the genetic diversity of donkeys have been carried out in individual countries. Thus, foundations have been laid for a valid conservation breeding of autochthonous donkey breeds in some countries of the Mediterranean region and in Asia. In this way, a study found that the Sicilian donkey breed Pantesco is genetically distinct from the Ragusano and Grigio Siciliano breeds. Hence, Pantesco definitely represents a breed of its own. The current conservation efforts are going to be directed accordingly. In this context it is also interesting that the scientific genetic research results correspond to the breeding history of the Ragusano and the Grigio Siciliano. Until 1950 a brown (Ragusano) and a grey (Grigio Siciliano) coat colour, morphologically the body size and geographically the breeding area were distinguished. The genetic testing has now proven that they are correspondingly different breeds. Nevertheless, there is a risk of inbreeding depression, which must be counteracted with a suitable breeding strategy.

Conservation of the donkey species

Structured conservation programmes are urgently needed. In recent years, significant progress has been made in France, Italy and Spain. However, the problem has not been taken seriously in other countries with traditional donkey husbandry up to this point. This is where the image of the donkey as a sign of poverty and backwardness is still deeply rooted. An international exchange about the experiences, possibilities and limits in the conservation of the long-eared donkeys would certainly be advisable. Donkeys are not domestic livestock by law. Ways must be found to subsidise the donkey husbandry similar to cattle or sheep. In order to pull together more, an exchange according to the three pillars of conservation work (holder – science – state) could help in individual countries or European regions. Last but not least, it is important to raise public awareness. In Central European countries, the donkey has become a lovingly cared for animal for recreation. In southern and southeastern Europe the donkey is still the “poor man's tractor”.

There is much to do to ensure that the donkey does not become an abstract nativity scene figure or fairy being. Let us get to work on conservation so that our children and children's children can experience real donkeys and not only pictures and figures.

And why the donkey has a cross on the back?

Jesus Christ once rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Popular belief says that the Savior gave the donkeys his sign of victory, the sign of the cross on the back, the eel line or cross line, as a thank you for the carrying service.





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