

The Sanga Cattle (*Bos Taurus Africanus*) originally found along the east coast of Southern Africa are known as the Nguni.

They occurred wherever the descendants of the original groups of African Nguni Tribes settled (Swaziland, KwaZulu, Mozambique, Zimbabwe). The east coast is climatically one of the most trying and disease-ridden cattle areas in Southern Africa⁽¹⁾.

The Nguni's survival, after more than 24 centuries of exposure to infectious diseases, including trypanosomiasis, heartwater, etc., attests to an acquired tolerance to these conditions. Later studies showed that this breed is the most tick resistant of all the local cattle breeds, both indigenous and exotic^(2,3).

Probably the two most important reasons why the Nguni was largely ignored in the past are:

- Historically the Nguni people owned these cattle and, due to an increase in human population, and the status value of cattle ownership, more animals were kept and overstocking became the order of the day. In this way the notion was established that the Nguni breed is a poor performer with little improvement potential. However, when exotic breeds were introduced on the advice of some agricultural counsellors they performed as poorly or even worse under these conditions. On the other hand, the Nguni performs better than initially expected under optimal conditions. It is fairly clear, therefore, that much of the bias against the Nguni has resulted from sub-optimal farming conditions.
- The general tendency to emphasize uniformity in stud breeding is in sharp contrast to the wide range of colours (6) and colour patterns (8) as well as different ecotypes encountered in the Nguni, giving it the appearance of an indiscriminate mixture of breeds.

History and Background of the Nguni in South Africa

Michiel M Scholtz
 Programme Leader:
 Beef, Dairy and Biotechnology
 ARC-Irene

Initial studies on the Nguni in the early 1980's indicated that the Nguni has the shortest calving interval of all beef cattle breeds in

South Africa at that stage⁽¹⁾. The original custodians of the Nguni reared all animals together, whilst all bulls were kept intact up to 3 to 4 years of age. Natural selection on fertility was thus allowed full play.

The following remark was made by scientists after visiting the Nguni areas in the 1940's⁽⁴⁾:

"These people pay no attention to the selection or retention of good bulls, but seem to keep any male, no matter how inferior. In general, the type of bull in use is a very inferior animal, and it is rare that a good bull is seen in spite of there being large numbers of excellent females. The number of good cows and heifers is, in fact, astonishing in view of the paucity of good bulls".

It is clear that these scientists discounted the mechanism and power of natural selection. Natural selection resulted in cows that are highly productive and adapted, and not in bulls that are good looking.

In the current context there is a danger that an over emphasis on the appearance of a bull may counteract the good results of natural selection. Whereas it is important to discriminate against a bull with defects, many of them having a genetic component, appearance should not be overemphasized. In most cases a good balance is maintained by the current Nguni Seed Stock Industry.

When the growth rate of the Nguni was compared to the other breeds for the period 1976-1985, it compared well with that of the Afrikaner and Brahman. Its efficiency (feed conversion ratio), however, exceeded that of most breeds, and compared with that of the Charolais and Sussex⁽¹⁾.

These initial results resulted in a revived interest in the Nguni, and in August 1983 it was recognized as a developing breed under the

Livestock Improvement Act (1977). At that stage there were about 3 000 Nguni females in a few (mostly government farms) well managed herds. However, the Nguni in the communal areas was under severe threat, mainly due to crossbreeding with the Brahman.

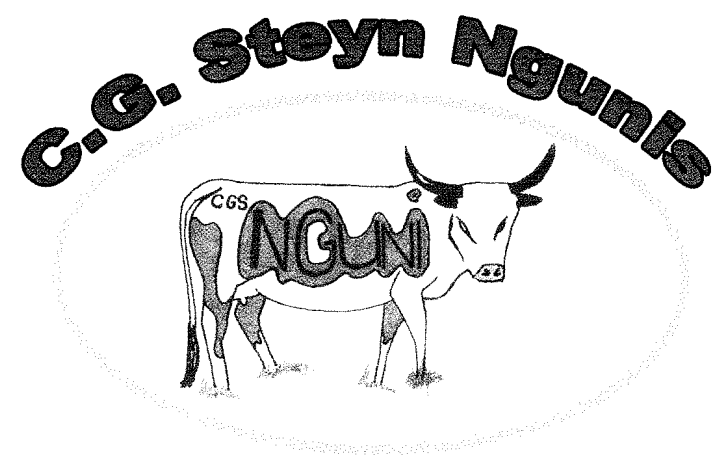
The numbers of the Nguni in the seed stock industry has increased since 1983 to almost 10 000 breeding females in 2003⁽⁵⁾. It is currently the sixth largest (numerical) beef breed in South Africa. There has also been a revived interest in the Nguni from the emerging sector. It can be clearly claimed that the research conducted by the ARC-Irene saved the Nguni from possible extinction.

REFERENCES

- ⁽¹⁾ SCHOLTZ, M.M., 1988. Proceedings, 3rd World Congress on Sheep and Beef Cattle Breeding. Paris, France, Vol 2, pg 303.
- ⁽²⁾ SCHOLTZ, M.M., *et al.*, 1991. Onderstepoort J. Vet. Res. Vol 58, pg 71.
- ⁽³⁾ KOSTRZEWSKI, M.W., 1989. Ph.D Thesis, Medunsa.
- ⁽⁴⁾ FAULKNER, D.E., 1947. The cattle of the Swazi. Livestock and Agricultural Department, Swaziland.
- ⁽⁵⁾ NATIONAL BEEF CATTLE IMPROVEMENT SCHEME, Newsletter No 91, June 2003.



** This article is available
in Zulu and Sotho
from the society.*



Christo Steyn

Sel: 082 852 2970 Tel: 014 755 3574/5 (Vaalwater)

E-pos: cgsteyn@worldonline.co.za

Waarom is Nguni my keuse?

Uitstaande kenmerke soos: gehardheid, vrugbaarheid, gemaklike kalwing en kwaliteit vleis, asook ekonomies hoog in waarde en in goeie aanvraag, maak dit 'n uitstekende ras om mee te boer.

As bonus is die skilder velle in aanvraag en hoog mode. - As bonus op bonus, is dit 'n rustige, saggearde ras om mee te werk.

Geen ander ras tot op hede kan dit bied nie!!

