

ALTERNATIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR NGUNI CATTLE

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The challenge facing Nguni cattle farmers is the fact that the majority of beef producers use a single marketing strategy.

More than 70% of all cattle slaughtered in the formal sector in South Africa come from feedlots. Unfortunately, some feedlots tend to discriminate against the indigenous breeds such as the Nguni. This price discrimination can range from R6 to a staggering R10 per kilogram for weaner calves, while some feedlots apparently even refuse to buy Nguni weaner calves.

We had first-hand experience of this when the ARC sold a number of weaner calves at an auction in December 2020. The Bonsmara and Bonsmara x Afrikaner calves, which were red, weighed an average of 195 kg and were

sold for R38.56 per kg (excluding VAT). The Bonsmara x Nguni calves, which showed the Nguni colour pattern, weighed an average of 191 kg and were sold for R28.80 per kg (excluding VAT). The difference was almost R10 per kg, or R2 020 per calf.

This situation puts the viability of farmers who farm with the indigenous Nguni and certain other tropically adapted breeds under pressure. The era of climate change, where global warming is putting extra pressure on the adaptation of breeds to their production environments, could lead to indigenous breeds providing the ultimate solution to global warming.

South Africa has excellent adapted indigenous beef cattle breeds that are known for their low maintenance needs, high meat quality, longevity and the ability to be marketed from the field. However, it is the latter trait that makes them less suitable for feedlot finishing, as they deposit fat on the normal feedlot ration earlier and at a younger age than the British and European breeds.

This means that alternative marketing strategies will have to be followed for a breed such as the Nguni, such as marketing animals at the age of 18-30 or even 36-40 months directly from the veld. Cattle younger than 30 months still have tender meat when no growth stimulants have been used.



Charolais X Nguni weighing an average of 461Kg at an age of between 12 and 14 months

The advantage of an ox production system (also young bulls up to 18 - 20 months) is its flexibility. Furthermore, it enables the producer to cater for different markets and at the same time reduce the risks compared to a production system where the main product is a weaner calf. In times of drought, the producer can get rid of the oxen (young bulls) sooner and does not have to sell his breeding animals. Thus, his breeding herd remains intact.

The herd composition of the two systems will differ drastically. An example of the herd composition of a weaner calf versus 18-month ox production system is shown in Table 1. A simulation programme was used to calculate this and the assumptions made were a farm of 2 000 ha, with a carrying capacity of 6 ha per Large Stock Unit (LSU). The weights used; was cow weight = 365 kg, weaning weight = 165 kg, 18-month ox / bull weight = 265, with a weaning percentage of 85%.

Table 1: The herd composition of a weaner calf production versus an 18 month bull/ox production system

Herd composition	Swearer calf production system	18 month ox / bull production system
Number of breeding cows	276	167
Number of weaner heifers	35*	70#
Number of weaner bull calves	0	70
Number of 18 month old heifers	35*	70#
Number of 18 month oxen / bulls	0	70
Number of breeding bulls	9	6
Number of culled cows	34	21
Total number of cattle on the farm	389	474

*** These are the heifers that are kept for replacement. The other heifers have been sold at weaning together with the bull calves.**

These are all the heifers that include those that are kept for replacement and those that will be marketed at with the oxen / bulls

The consumer is more sophisticated and health and quality conscious than a few years ago. This is illustrated by the increasing demand for organic and natural products, such as grassfed beef. Unfortunately, South Africa's current meat classification system does not describe quality and therefore producers

who produce higher quality meat from natural grazing without stimulants are not necessarily rewarded.

A separate marketing channel or niche market will therefore have to be developed to market these oxen / bulls. It can even be extended to the export markets of Europe and Asia. However, indigenous breeds will have to form strategic alliances if they are to succeed in niche markets. Furthermore, a reliable traceability system is essential.

Key notes

The transition from a weaner calf production system to an ox production system can cause cash flow problems in the first years. This can be overcome by marketing all the low-producing and low-fertile cows in the herd. It is also necessary to prevent overgrazing, as more animals will be kept and extra grazing is needed for the oxen to graze. It will therefore be important to reduce the number of cows.

Keep a core herd of only the cows that produce the best. This means that there are no passengers in the herd that can erode the profit. This will ensure that the offspring has the genetic makeup to adapt and grow under the veld conditions. This is also the ideal opportunity to get rid of those Nguni cows that constantly wean calves that weigh less than 100 kg.

Even with an ox production system, crossbreeding can add value. Let's look at the example of the Afrikaner and Nguni breeds. Suppose the 24-month ox weight of the Afrikaner is 440 kg and that of the Nguni 320 kg. If Afrikaner bulls are mated with Nguni cows and there is 10% hybrid power, then the crossbred ox will weigh 418 kg at 24 months, which is 98 kg more than the pure Nguni.

Another possibility for commercial Nguni cattle farmers is to use black Angus or Charolais bulls. In such a case, the Nguni color patterns are "hidden" and the calves can be marketed to feedlots (see picture of Charolais x Nguni).

An ox production system also offers a marketing opportunity for emerging and communal farmers. These farmers own about 4.5 million cattle and most of these are Sanga or Sanga crosses, and other tropical adapted crosses.

How long will South Africa still be able to afford the luxury of feeding human food to animals? (I have been criticized a lot on this question). Alternative production systems will therefore have to be developed.

According to the simulation programme used, a small frame breed in an ox production system will usually be more viable than a weaner calf production system, no matter what the weaning percentage of the herd is.

Very few consumers are aware of the health benefits of grassfed beef. It has been scientifically proven to be healthier, with the right balance between Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids, with higher levels of conjugated linoleic acid that is anti-carcinogenic.

In Conclusion

One of the major limitations of an ox production system is the fact that the current meat classification system is a carcass description system and not a quality assurance system. The most important criteria for determining the price of meat in the current system are age and fat. It discriminates by implication against young animals (AB class and even BB class) with excellent meat quality that have been rounded off with or without supplementation on grass. The outstanding quality of the meat of indigenous breeds is also not recognized in the current classification system.

One of the most important characteristics of meat quality is tenderness. The Nguni breed is known for its meat tenderness, which sometimes surpasses even those of the best British breeds. This means that the meat of young (AB-class) Nguni cattle can be just as tender as AA-class animals. ■