

GRASS-FED BEEF – THE FUTURE FOR NGUNI CATTLE?

Is There a Future for Grass-fed Nguni Cattle Farming?

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INTRODUCTION

Grass-fed beef is slowly gaining popularity but is still a long way from becoming mainstream. Vested interests in the feedlot industry and supermarket chains, monopoly of the weaner market by feedlots, a grading system that prejudices older finished animals, higher costs due to poor economies of scale in marketing, prejudice against any yellow-coloured fat, a reputation as an expensive health food for the rich, and a perception that it is not as tender and tasty as feedlot beef, include some of the obstacles to growth in popularity.

The case for grass-fed beef:

Taste is a subjective quality. Opinion varies, depending on personal taste and self-interest in either grass-fed or feedlot beef. Many people consider feedlot beef to be tender but bland in flavour compared to grass-fed beef. Tenderness is influenced not only by age and finish but also, more importantly, by low-stress transport and slaughter plus good hanging, chilling, and cutting. I have enjoyed tender, tasty braai beef from mature, grass fattened cows, prepared by an excellent butcher who paid a lot of attention to getting everything right from farm to fork. *

Grass-fed beef, especially if it is chemical growth stimulant and hormone-free, is healthy food. Its fat composition is sufficiently different to feedlot beef to counter the cardiovascular diseases associated with long-term beef consumption.

** I salute George van Heerden, client, friend, farmer, and butcher*

There are three problems with producing beef in feedlots that do not occur with grass-fed production. Their food must be grown as crops. They are given antibiotics and other drugs routinely. Accumulating dung and urine become an environmental hazard. Each finished feedlot animal requires an annual yield of between 0.15 and 0.25 hectares of cropland to produce feedlot beef (maize yielding 5 – 6 tons/hectare and other products). This land is used better for direct human food production and/or conservation and rewilding.

Increasing numbers of crop farmers are planting mixed species of cover crops in their lands and fallow fields to improve soil health. These forages are high in value for growing and fattening beef cattle. Many also utilise crop by-products e.g., maize stover. So, opportunities continue to grow for crop farmers to maintain, grow and finish young animals on crop residues, cover crops, and fallow lands. If they have veld, they can breed their own. If they do not, they can purchase weaners and other young, growing animals.

South African veld is mostly poorly utilised and/or underutilised. Evidence continues to build that grazing and recovering veld or pasture right in regenerative ways increases soil carbon, shifting carbon from air to soil. These counteract the effects of animals to air carbon shift as carbon dioxide and methane produced by cow lungs and guts.

Producing beef in this way is economically, socially, and environmentally positive. There are great opportunities for change here. Increasing numbers of farmers are leading the way. Research continues to validate and improve their management.

Nguni grass-fed beef

Nguni cattle country, KwaZulu-Natal, has great varieties in altitude, rainfall, terrain, temperature, and veld types. As the highest rainfall province, it also has excellent conditions for ticks, and a high challenge from ticks and the diseases they carry.

Nguni cattle adapted over centuries to this varied environment and developed natural resistance to ticks and diseases, not found in many other breeds. These reduce dipping costs and losses to illness. In some areas, there is little or no shade. In others, there is little shelter against windy, cold, wet weather. Yet, Nguni cattle continue to thrive.

Until recently, Nguni cattle were never fed grain. They are adapted to a 100% forage diet of varying quantity and quality from sweet to sour veld, through droughts and floods, from ocean to the Drakensberg.

Finally, fertility is the cornerstone of herd economics. Nguni cattle have a deserved reputation for excellent fertility. They hold condition well in tough conditions, compared to larger framed, less well-adapted cattle. They have the legs and agility to graze on rough, rocky steep terrain.

For all these reasons and more Nguni cattle do well from east coast to west, from the Cape to Limpopo, and beyond.

Grass-fed beef fits the Nguni breed motto: “The breed from the past, for the future”. ■



*Adapted to snow,
KZN Midlands*



*Adapted to hot
Zululand bushveld*