



The Karoo's Nguni revolution

Indigenous Nguni cattle are proving their mettle in the arid Karoo region, despite the area traditionally being regarded as marginal cattle country.

The Karoo in South Africa's arid hinterland covers a huge portion of the country's western interior to the south of the Orange River. It consists of two closely related biomes: the Succulent Karoo, with its mostly winter rainfall along the western coastline, and the larger Nama Karoo, with a predominantly summer rainfall, to the east.

The Nama Karoo has three main sub-regions: the Upper Karoo in the north, separated from the Great Karoo by the Great Escarpment with the Upper Karoo rivers flowing northwards into the Orange River, and the Little Karoo in the south.

LONG TRADITION OF SHEEP FARMING

The Karoo is historically sheep

country, with a long tradition of producing premium Merino wool. Karoo mutton is also renowned for its unique flavour imparted by the succulent shrubs on which the sheep browse.

DIFFICULT FARMING CONDITIONS

The extreme climate, characterised by hot and dry conditions with regular droughts, makes this land difficult to farm.

Limited surface water and a depleted grass reserve have traditionally rendered the Karoo unsuitable for cattle.

However, during the past few decades, cattle numbers on Karoo farms have increased dramatically, due to a new approach to veld management and adoption of new

methods. Through the use of polyethylene pipe, farmers are now able to extend their stock water networks across large farms for more extensive cattle grazing operations.

NO OTHER BREED CAN PRODUCE BEEF BETTER IN THE KAROO

In addition, cattle have been valuable in breaking up the hard soil crust in camps in which only sheep have grazed for hundreds of years. The resultant improvement in veld condition and an increase in grass cover have further fuelled the growth in cattle numbers in the region.

The Nguni is at the forefront of this revolution. This indigenous breed has proven to be well-suited to extensive

ABOVE: The Nguni breed is well-suited to walk long distances for water, especially in arid regions such as the Karoo. COURTESY OF KAROO NGUNI CLUB

ranching operations on Karoo rangeland. Over thousands of years, indigenous cattle breeds such as the Nguni have become adapted to produce under arid conditions. Indigenous cattle are less fastidious grazers that can subsist on Karoo bushes during times of drought. A medium-framed animal like this is well-suited to walking long distances to reach water daily, making them ideal for large camps with limited access to water.

The Nguni is also unsurpassed in terms of fertility: cows can each produce and wean a calf every year irrespective of veld condition. This makes a beef operation less vulnerable to sporadic drought, which is a part of life when farming in the Karoo.

Simply put, no cattle breed can produce beef under extensive Karoo conditions better than the Nguni.

KAROO NGUNI CLUB ANNUAL SALE

In 1998, a group of Nguni farmers from the Karoo came together to form the Karoo Nguni Club, with top Nguni breeder Pat Hobbs as chairperson. The club offers Karoo Nguni farmers training days as well as a quarterly newsletter.

Since 2002, it has also hosted an annual sale in Graaff-Reinet during April. This is an opportunity for Karoo Nguni farmers to offer their registered and commercial cattle to buyers seeking the benefits of Nguni cattle.

Over the years, the sale has developed a reputation of traditional Karoo hospitality, with buyers coming from far afield to buy these hardy and productive cattle. The Eastern Cape Indigenous Veld Goat club holds its sale on the day before the Karoo Nguni Club sale.

This Nguni sale is one of the largest in South Africa, offering on average at least 200 animals. This year, it will feature 85 registered females and one registered bull. Registered animals are sold under the auspices of the Nguni Cattle Breeders' Society. A total of 120 commercial females will also be offered at the sale.

The event will be conducted by Sheard Auctioneers at the Graaff-Reinet showground on 10 April at 11am.

• Phone Geoff Crewe-Brown (Karoo Nguni Club chairperson) on 082 873 3000. Visit www.ngunikaroo.co.za.