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Nguni—a new old cattle breed for rangelands in communal areas of South Africa

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Animals on extensive rangelands need to be well adapted to the environment. This includes resistance against prevalent diseases, and the ability to cope with low-quality forage, with heat or cold, and/or drought or water shortage, depending on the environment. Nguni cattle are such animals, adapted to the savannah environment of southern Africa. They are thought to originate from cattle domesticated in northeast Africa and evolved in South Africa in precolonial times as small, early-maturing, disease-resistant, docile and multipurpose cattle that can cope with low-quality forage (Bester et al., 2003). They attained a high cultural importance, particularly among the Zulu people (Poland et al., 2003). Colonial farmers and scientists rejected them as too variable in colour and shape and regarded them as "poor beasts". During the period of apartheid, agricultural services actively discredited indigenous livestock breeds, to the extent that livestock inspectors were instructed to castrate local "shrub bulls". Fortunately, this was not widely implemented (Scholtz 2006). Slowly, communal farmers were convinced that good animal husbandry means keeping large-framed, so-called commercial livestock, regular dipping for tick control and supplementary feed. In 1950s, some scientists who became interested in the Nguni as hardy, low-input animals acquired some Nguni cattle and kept them without tick control and supplements. Later, commercial farmers formed a Nguni breed society. The Nguni are now the sixth most important beef breed of South Africa (Scholtz 2006). Studies suggest that, in the case of Nguni cattle, the costs of tick control are considerably higher than are benefits (Bester et al., 2003). A book on indigenous classification of the Nguni (Poland et al., 2003) became a bestseller.

During a study in 2003, cattle-keepers in communal areas of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province claimed ignorance of the advantages of Nguni cattle (Bayer et al., 2003). They regarded Nguni as something for white farmers, although a large number of Nguni cattle of varying purity are kept in communal areas (Bester et al., 2003). However, discussions of the merits of the breed created interest among the KZN farmers. As a first step, farmers' visits were organised to stud farms and research stations that keep Nguni cattle. Some farmers then wanted to start introducing Nguni into their herds. Because of widespread cattle theft, they argued that using a community bull would be difficult. Therefore, as a first step, artificial insemination was tried, combined with hormone treatment of selected cows to synchronize their cycles. This scheme proved to be a complete failure, as the cows did not conceive. Farmers argued for a second attempt to introduce more Nguni genes into their herds. This time, a young bull from one of the research stations and a modified concept of community bull-keeping was used that allows several households to make use of the bull. The bull was kept in the cattle kraal at the homestead of one of the farmers participating in the scheme, together with heifers or cows of other participating farmers. During daytime, the bull and associated cows were managed as a separate herd and not allowed to mix with other cattle grazing in the area. The only argument against the bull was that it was dehorned, which put it at a disadvantage with local horned bulls and oxen. In early 2006, the first calves were born and farmers are now eager to see how the calves will turn out as grown animals. The Department of Agriculture subsequently donated a second bull to the project (this time, one with horns). Farmers started to observe differences between Nguni and their other calves with respect to tick load, but have not yet reduced treatment against ticks, as they still fear to risk losing their calves from tick-borne diseases. It is hoped that, in the long run, communal farmers will realise the potential of reducing acaricide costs and supplementary feeding when keeping herds that have a larger percentage of Nguni genes.

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