

To save a rare Zulu sheep

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For thousands of years the Zulu sheep, or Izimvu, was a cornerstone of traditional pastoral practices in what later became known as KwaZulu-Natal. However, crossbreeding and fragmentation of its population have put the Izimvu on the endangered list, threatening the loss of a breed perfectly adapted to its environment. Now KZN farmer is looking to save the Izimvu from extinction. Lloyd Phillips reports. Issue date : 08 August 2008

According to the Agricultural Research Council (ARC's) indigenous genotypes division, the Zulu sheep, or Izimvu, evolved from the Nguni sheep that were kept by Iron Age people. When they began migrating south over 2 000 years ago, one of the groups came to the east coast, now KwaZulu-Natal. The Izimvu's relatives include the Swazi and Pedi breeds. Richard Haigh and his partner David Brennan farm on Enaleni – "place of abundance" – in Manderston just outside Pietermaritzburg. For a number of years before settling on the farm, Richard worked in the province's non-governmental organisation sector, promoting sustainable land use practices among marginalised and impoverished rural people.

A rare breed

"In 1993, while I was working in the Valley of a Thousand Hills for the Valley Trust, came

across what appeared to be three pure Izimvu belonging to a household there,” says Richard. “For the 14 years worked there, these were the only specimens ever saw. The widow who owned them couldn’t expand her flock because there were no others to breed with in her area, so she eventually slaughtered them.” Richard was both intrigued by the breed and concerned about its absence from community households. Then, while working in other traditional authority areas, he came across scattered small populations of what appeared to be Izimvu crossbred with the modern Dorper. When he asked the owners why they had crossbred their Izimvu, a common response was that they were too small compared to modern sheep breeds and the Dorper crossing gave more desirable, larger-framed animals.

Undermining the Izimvu

“Another cause for this crossbreeding trend appeared to be the agricultural extension officers’ lack of appreciation for, and promotion of, the Izimvu’s uniqueness and remarkable ability to survive in the hot, humid, coastal bushveld or the hot, dry bushveld,” he says. “These extension officers were, perhaps unintentionally, promoting the misguided perception among the people that modern breeds were better for production in these areas and that old breeds like the Izimvu had little farming value.”

“In our enthusiasm in agricultural extension we often overlook the obvious and the dwindling populations of Izimvu were not noticed. But these sheep are a resource from the past for the present and the future.” Commercial sheep production is not considered viable in the climate of the eastern half of KZN. However the Izimvu has always done well there. Unfortunately, rural subsistence and small-scale farmers appear to have believed what they were told by their extension officers and converted to modern breeds even if they were not suited to the area.

Conservation efforts

Richard started to breed the Izimvu to conserve it, but struggled to source purebred animals for his nucleus flock. While the ARC and the agriculture department in KZN had their own Izimvu flocks, they were not prepared to allow Richard access to them. “But their flocks are closely related due to the limited gene pool of this breed within the government’s breeding programme. My goal is to diversify genetics and to have a strong, active population of Izimvu while still retaining the typical traits, so it was important that I sourced animals that were unrelated. In 2007, I travelled to various traditional authority areas in KZN and managed to find a total of 10 Izimvu,” Richard

recalls. "I now have 16 of them. The rams are of two bloodlines and the ewes are of five. All are from ecotypes that complement ours at Enaleni."

Unique traits and adaptations

Richard has noted some distinctive physical traits. Firstly, the Izimvu is a fat-tailed breed, instead of storing fat around its body as many modern breeds do. In a hot and humid climate, body fat makes it difficult for an animal to disperse heat and remain cool. The lean body of the Izimvu allows it to regulate its body temperature in its preferred environment, while the stored fat in its tail is a food reserve in times of drought and other adverse conditions. Richard feels this lean build also gives the Izimvu the agility it needs to forage over long distances. It's a grazer and browser, with the advantage of a diverse diet – vital when certain food sources are scarce. "The Izimvu has hair and not wool, because wool would also make it difficult to regulate its body temperature in hot conditions," Richard explains. "Its hair is relatively fine, allowing it to release body heat and it's also not so prone to matting or to picking up grass seeds, burrs and thorns.

The Izimvu moults ahead of the warmer months, leaving a thin layer of hair on its skin. This layer thickens again in winter." According to Richard, the breed has a high tolerance and resilience to a variety of internal and external parasites like ticks and parasitic intestinal worms. The ARC has also confirmed it is tolerant to tick-borne diseases. Richard says this is one of the breed's remarkable adaptations to its environment. "But these adaptations can only be maintained if the Izimvu is managed within the environments where it evolved," Richard warns. "Managing it on pastures would be detrimental to its health and would also weaken its evolutionary traits. On Enaleni, we try to mimic the traditional environment of the breed." Two other physical traits are that rams can be horned or polled and that both the rams and ewes can have small mouse-like ears. Although there seems to be debate about the reasons for their small ears, many Zulu elders that Richard's spoken to have confirmed that this breed always had this unusual trait. "An idea I've considered is that the ears are a protection measure against picking up ticks while grazing, but no one has confirmed this yet," he says.

Looking to the future

Ultimately, Richard would like to promote the endangered breed so that the population will increase and that it will be pure, viable and genetically diverse. He believes that this

could be achieved by having more flocks on tribal authority land. Other farmers should also become involved in developing their own flocks. This would help safeguard the genetic potential and uniqueness of the Izimvu and owners would have access to a wider gene pool.

Richard points out that an important consideration for people thinking of investing in the breed would be its production potential in light of climate change. "I believe it could become a valuable resource." In future, Richard says he plans to collaborate more with the ARC, as well as the agriculture department. This will allow him to track the DNA of his and other people's flocks in order to better manage breeding programmes. Contact Richard Haigh on 082 872 2049 or e-mail at enalenifarm@gmail.com or visit www.enalenifarm.co.za.