

DOES SIZE COUNT?

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What is it that attracts cattle breeders to consider the Nguni?

Being one of the smallest breeds of beef cattle in South Africa, it certainly would not be heaviest weaner weight or biggest adult size which attracts attention but rather the ability to thrive and produce at low cost in African conditions.

Why would the Nguni possess this ability? The answer is simply that nature's challenges have played a major role in selecting the breed over thousands of years to be of the ideal shape and size for its environment. The longest that any other exotic breed could possibly have been in South Africa is roughly 360 years, considering Jan Van Riebeeck landed in 1652. This gives the Nguni a distinct advantage over other breeds in South Africa. As breeders we need to maintain and nurture this advantage. How does one achieve this?

- a) Recognize the Nguni's unique characteristics that nature has produced.
- b) Continue breeding with good examples of the breed.
- c) Cull what nature would have culled eg: functional defects, low fertility, poor milk production, poor pigment etc.
- d) Avoid pampering as this reduces the natural selection process.
- e) Resist the temptation to change the breed into something else eg: bigger, growthier, and heavier.

Change due to selection is possible, but comes at a price. A 500 kg Nguni cow weaning a 220 kg calf at 7 months is achievable, but will she be as efficient and profitable as a 360 kg cow weaning a 170 kg calf, and will she continue producing her 220 kg calves, or any calf at all, when the going gets tough?

I was recently approached by a prominent tomato farmer (I am surrounded by them) who also farms commercially with a large breed of cattle. He questioned the value of my small 170 kg weaners, compared to his heavier weaners. My response seemed to open his eyes. I simply asked him how he compares himself as a tomato farmer with his neighbours. Does he compare the size of one of his tomatoes with one of theirs or rather tons produced per hectare and the cost of that production?

It just so happened that he had abandoned the old-fashioned large tomato varieties in favour of small to medium varieties, which produce more per hectare and have a longer shelf life!

In conclusion, I believe that Nguni breeders should keep things simple and let the environment determine the shape and size of their cattle. It is up to each Stud breeder to ensure that he breeds true to type, pure Ngunis and that he consistently culls defects.

Keep the cows that calve every year under natural conditions without pampering. Weigh these cows and weaners whatever their average size and weight is, it will be right for your conditions!

