



Donkey Breeds in Europe Abstract

The study undertaken by the SAVE Monitoring Institute "Donkey Breeds in Europe" provides an overview of the current situation of the domesticated species "donkey" in Europe. First investigations were done in 1997/1998, which has now been updated and extended. Extensive literature and internet research was followed by surveys sent to all the relevant institutions and organisations. Along with origin, domestication and use, particular value was placed on the current distribution and situation in European countries.

The origin of the donkey was the African wild donkey. Donkeys were already domesticated in North Africa between 8 and 9'000 years ago. 4'000 years ago, donkeys were introduced to Spain and Italy via Morocco. The Romans distributed the donkey further over the Alps and to northern and eastern Europe.

There has been little change in use of the donkey since their first domestication: today donkeys are still primarily used as draught, pack and riding animals. Variety in the development of the body depends on the region, the way they are kept, the climate and breeding. There are comparatively few pedigree breeds. Often the breeds are not clearly defined, as is the case with other domesticated species. Furthermore, the breeding basis of the donkey breeds is relatively small, which increases the danger of inbreeding.

Due to their modest needs, resistance to disease, stamina and pleasant nature, donkeys have been particularly valued. Donkey meat is only consumed in a few countries in Europe. The albumin rich milk is particularly suitable for special dietary needs. It contains more sugar and protein than cow's milk. As a niche product, donkey milk is receiving more attention. Cosmetics are also being made from donkey milk and are to be found as a niche product in Italy and France. Donkey leather was formerly used to

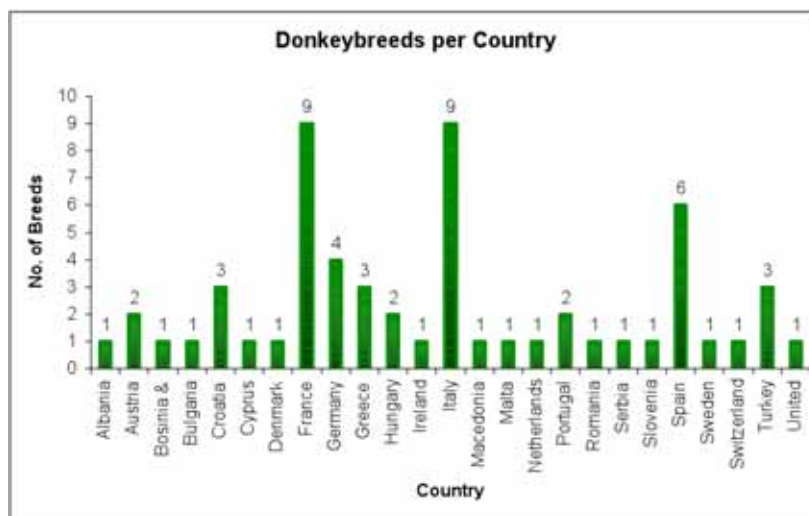


make parchment. The breeding of mules from horse mares and donkey jacks to create robust work animals is rare these days. Due to this the giant donkeys, bred for mule breeding are now critically endangered.

The tasks traditionally performed by a donkey are being replaced by machines. Medicine, therapy, hobby as well as meat and milk production provide small niches for a few breeds. The stock numbers of donkeys are sinking globally; In Europe this trend is dramatic. In south European countries, donkeys are kept by an aging population, which is a factor in reducing stock numbers and the younger generations often rid themselves of donkeys at the first opportunity. Fortunately, the last years have seen an increase in interest in keeping donkeys as hobby and leisure animals in northern and central Europe. Friends of the donkey have organised clubs together. Breed selection and pedigree breeding however, rarely takes place and crossbreeds are generally to be found.

Results

In 24 countries, 58 breeds or varieties of donkey were identified. In nearly all countries an unspecific „common donkey“ was listed. This was particularly in those countries with



a tradition of donkey keeping such as Bulgaria or Greece. In Greece alone, the stock of donkeys fell in the last 50 years by 96%. The majority of donkey breeds were to be found in France, Italy and Spain. However, the numbers per breeds tended to be under 500 animals, according to the FAO criteria considered endangered. Only the Dinaric donkey and the Burro de Miranda in Portugal have more than 1'000 individuals.

Difficulties are created for the keeping and breeding of donkeys by the fact that they are often not state recognised as a farm animal, because of this, no subsidies can be claimed for keeping them. The economic interest in donkey keeping is low. Only very few donkey breeds can be used for the niche markets of therapy or milk production, trekking or leisure. These activities and products are mainly found in the more affluent regions, less so on the “donkey rich” countries of South and South Eastern Europe.

A difference in the way the donkeys are kept can also be found: influenced by cultural, economic and emotional interests, the animals are often looked after badly or incorrectly.



Facts and Need for Action:

- Donkeys are endangered as a species in Europe
- The knowledge of breeds and breed descriptions is being lost
- Knowledge about keeping, care and use is low
- The bad image of the donkey needs to be improved
- Public awareness needs to be raised about the species donkey
- Research and monitoring needs to be encouraged
- State support for non-state activity is essential
- Standardisation of breeds and varieties where needed.

Measures

So that donkeys can regain their status as a valued companion to humankind the following measures are needed:

- Structured conservation programmes must be initiated
- Experts need to be linked cross-border
- Public awareness has to be raised
- Farms and stations: donkey keeping needs to be networked and interested people should have access to information through, for example the Ark Network (www.arca-net.info).

SAVE Foundation and the Monitoring Institute will continue to work towards the conservation of donkeys, to initiate the implementation of the above measures, to support and coordination.

The complete study can be downloaded here:

<http://www.save-foundation.net/pdf/donkey.pdf>

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