South African sheep breeds: Karakul

**SCOPE:** This Info-pack provides a brief description of the Karakul sheep breed.

**KEY WORDS:** Type, Origin, Description, Production, Products, Distribution, Numbers.


**Type**
Fat-tailed pelt breed.

![Photo: Gretha Snyman](image)

**Origin of the breed**
The Karakul sheep is believed to be one of the oldest breeds of domesticated sheep in the world. Originally from the steppes of Turkistan, this broad tailed sheep gradually spread to other regions of Central Asia. This breed is named after the village Qorako’l, which lies in present-day Uzbekistan.

On 24 September 1907, the first 12 sheep, 2 rams and 10 ewes, arrived on board a freight ship at Swakopmund, which at that time still had a harbour. These sheep were imported to Namibia by the German government. About 750 Karakuls were imported to Namibia from Asia at the beginning of the previous century. From there the breed also spread to the Northern Cape and surrounding areas. Indigenous sheep breeds like the Blackhead Persian and the Namaqua Afrikaner were especially suitable for the upgrading of the Karakul. The numbers of Karakul increased rapidly until it reached its peak of more than 5 million for Namibia and South Africa in 1979.

The local industry took a hit in the 1970s, with production dropping from 3.4 million pelts per year in 1970 to 56,600 in 1997. The pelt numbers slowly increased again after 1997 and the annual production now stands at approximately 140 000 pelts a year.

**Description**
The grown sheep are medium-sized; their wool is a mixture of coarse and fine fibres, varying in colour from black to shades of tan and grey. Karakul sheep have a wide, fat tail that stores fat.

The head is long and narrow, slightly indented between the eyes and often exhibiting a Roman type nose. The long ears are always pointing downward and slightly forward. Most rams have horns and the females are polled.

![Photo: Slowfoodusa.org](image)

The Karakul is distinguished by its coloured fleece, which is due to a dominant black gene. Most lambs are born coal black with lustrous wavy curls, with the face, ears and legs usually showing smooth, sleek hair. As the lambs grow, the curls open and lose its pattern and the colour generally begins to turn brownish or bluish grey, getting greyer with age. Many adults have a double coat, a fine down undercoat, covered by a coat of guard hair.
Grey, white and brown coloured sheep are also found.

In Southern Africa Karakul breeders moved away from the long curly type of hair shown by the Asian Karakul. Our Karakul has high quality, short and strong hair with a sought after character. The ‘character’ refers to the wavy pattern of the hair and the spacing of the waves.

Because of the significant differences between the pelts of Asian Karakul lambs and those of Southern African lambs, the local Karakul industry has embarked on an exercise to rename and rebrand the Karakul breed. Since the first half of the 20th century, Karakul pelts from South Africa and Namibia have been marketed as Swakara (derived from South West Africa Karakul). In April 2013, Namibian authorities granted permission for the Karakul breed name to change to Swakara. Similar authorisation from South Africa is still pending. The name change is necessary as pelt buyers associate Karakul with heavier-haired pelts.

**Production norms**
Karakuls breed out of season, making it possible for 3 lamb crops every 2 years. Single lambs are the rule, although twins are not uncommon.

The Karakul ram can weigh 80 – 100 kg, while the ewes range from 45 – 70 kg.

**Products**
- **Meat** - The meat of the Karakul is very lean and the breed’s abundant milk supply is used for butter and cheese in some countries.
- **Wool** – The wool of adult sheep is used in making carpets and other heavy fabrics. The Karakul produces a light weight, high volume, strong fibre fleece, that at its best is long and lustrous, usually with no crimp. It is easily spun, with little preparation. It produces a superior carpet yarn, is often used for rugs and saddle blankets, outer garments and wall-hangings, and has an excellent felting ability. It is the wool from which the art of felting evolved.
- **Pelts** - The best pelts are obtained from unborn lambs and those up to 3 days old.

**Normal production environment**
Arid to semi-desert grassland.

**Breed numbers**
The Karakul industry has survived two decades of declining demand for Swakara pelts, with the number of Karakul stud breeders dropping dramatically from more than 700 in the 1970s to the current number of 54.
There are 40 Karakul breeders in Namibia and 14 Karakul breeders in South Africa.
There are ± 200 000 Karakul sheep found mainly in the Keetmanshoop area of Namibia.
There are ± 40 000 Karakul sheep in South Africa, which are found mainly in the Northern Cape.

**References**
This info-pack was compiled from various sources of information. The text may contain extracts from the following:

www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep/karakul