



## South African sheep breeds: Nguni sheep

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

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

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### Type

Indigenous fat-tailed meat breed.



Photo: Gretha Snyman

### Origin of the breed

The Nguni sheep of Zululand and Swaziland migrated to South Africa with the Nguni people between 200 and 400 AD down the eastern coast to the areas where they are found today. The Iron Age people in their migration took several routes to the south. One group came down the east coast into Natal and then dispersed further south. This dispersal was limited by the growing conditions of their crops, such as millet, which could not be grown on the cold plateau of the Highveld. These people brought sheep and cattle with them and it is these that are thought to be ancestors of the present Nguni breeds.

### Description

The Nguni sheep have a mixed appearance in that their tails can be either thin or fat, they have different colours and sizes and they can have a coat of either wool or hair. This variation seems to point to recently crossbred sheep, but in fact is due to a broad ancestral gene pool. This broad

gene pool can give rise to a varied physical appearance but also supplies the genes necessary for the animals' adaptation to different and sometimes challenging conditions.

The Nguni is a small to medium framed, multi-coloured fat-tailed sheep. Generally, this breed has a black, brown or reddish brown coat that is sometimes pied. They tend to be woollier than breeds such as the Pedi and Damara. Rams are horned or polled. The ears, which are short and narrow, are sometimes very small and are often referred to as mouse ears. The tail is fat, long and carrot shaped. However, some sheep have long thin tails that contain very little fat.



Photo: T. Dugmore

### Production norms

Nguni weights at KZN experimental stations

Trait	Rams	Ewes
2-tooth weight (kg)	32	26
8-tooth weight (kg)	38	29

## Products

- Meat - The carcass is regarded as a fat-tailed type. Meat of the Nguni breed is compact, savoury, flavourful and lean.
- Fat tail - External fat is mainly located in the tail.
- Skins – High quality skin.



Photo: Junkmail.co.za

## Normal production environment

- Hot humid coastal bushveld to hot dry bushveld.
- Apart from the research flocks, very small flocks are being kept by communal and small scale farmers in KwaZulu-Natal.

## Breed numbers

Two herds of Nguni sheep were established at the Makhatini Research Station below the Pongola River Dam and at the University of Zululand near Empangeni. The numbers of this breed have declined rapidly due to replacement by imported breeds and to stock theft that is prevalent in KwaZulu-Natal. In 1995, Q.P. Campbell estimated that only 3 000 Nguni sheep are left in the country. Today there are much less pure Nguni sheep left. It is therefore evident that this breed should be regarded as critically endangered and steps towards its protection and conservation should be taken as a priority.

A Presidium was founded in 2009. The aim of this Presidium is to preserve this ancient sheep breed, whose survival has been threatened by crossbreeding. The Presidium wants to identify and unite the last remaining herders in the area, increase the sheep population, create an association for the safeguarding and promotion of this indigenous breed and draw up a protocol for its farming.



Photo: Enalenifarm.co.za



Photo: Enalenifarm.co.za

## References

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

Ramsay, K., Harris, L. & Kotzé, A., 2001. Landrace breeds: South Africa's indigenous and locally developed farm animals. Farm animal conservation trust, Pretoria.