

A Brief History of the Dorper and White Dorper Sheep

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Development of the Dorper Sheep Breed

During the 1930's it became apparent that the sheep breeds available at that time, were not able to produce the type of high quality carcass required by International meat markets under the extensive & often harsh grazing conditions of South Africa. The South African Department of Agriculture, together with local sheep breeders, therefore embarked upon a long range research and development project in order to rectify the problem. In the early experiments it was discovered that the Dorset Horn X Blackhead Persian produced the most desired attributes, so it was decided to concentrate all research on these two breeds. The Blackhead Persian was selected for its non-selective grazing, coat shedding, hardiness and good mothering abilities. The Dorset Horn was selected for its rapid growth rates and carcass attributes. The Dorper Sheep Breed was developed through strict selection pressure for all of these positive attributes from the founding breeds, hence all traits are expressed in today's Dorper sheep.

The Development of the White Dorper Sheep Breed

Several sheep breeders in South Africa originally decided to concentrate upon the breeding of a white sheep. These white sheep were bred out of Dorset Horn X Blackhead Persian or the Dorset Horn X Van Rooy crossbred. These first white sheep were known as "Dorsian" ("Dorsie" in Afrikaans). A separate breeders Society was formed, however in 1964 it was decided to affiliate with the Dorper Sheep Breeders' Society, since the aim was to breed the same type of sheep with exception of the colour.

The Australian Dorper and White Dorper

SAABCO first introduced the breed into Australia in 1996 with the release of Dorper embryos for sale. Wescorp the importer was based in Perth and the majority of the embryos sold went into Western Australia, although some were bought by sheep breeders in other states.

1997 saw the importation of more Dorper embryos and the the first consignments of White Dorper embryos into Australia. Initially Australian farmers displayed lukewarm interest in the Dorper sheep. Their introduction was fairly low key, unlike the Damaras (introduced at the same time), which received full entrepreneurial promotion. Prices for early stock were very high as their numbers were few and it was a costly exercise getting these animals on the ground. At this time also, a lot of more traditional farmers had difficulty getting their mind around the concept of NOT shearing a sheep.

With the fall in wool prices and continued rise in the costs of producing wool, coupled with sustained high prices for lamb, more and more farmers have begun to take a serious look at the Dorper sheep. Drought conditions in many areas of Australia also prompted a great deal of interest in the breed, as the ewes are able to turn off good lambs even in harsh conditions. By 2010 there was a very high level of interest in Dorper sheep all around Australia. Being such an adaptable breed of sheep, interest in them covers the whole spectrum; from people who want to run thousands of sheep in order to turn off cost effective lambs into the meat market, to hobby farmers who just want a couple of easy care lawn mowers to keep the grass down on their block.