Case study Nr 2

The Aubrac region and the Aubrac beef cattle breed

Evolution of a local breed and of livestock production in a mountain region in France

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Introduction: beef french cattle breeds

Environment and people

Farming systems

Current status of the Aubrac breed

Summary
Main French beef cattle breeds

Specialised breeds

Charolaise
1 835 000 cows

Blonde d’Aquitaine
483 000 cows

Limousine
907 000 cows

Salers
205 000 cows

Mountain breeds

Aubrac
105 000 cows

Map: IGN
Statistics: RGA, 2000
Photos: SOPEXA, UPRAs

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Summary
Environment

- Plateau of volcanic origin
- Altitude = 900–1400 m
- Permanent grassland

- Long and harsh Winter period

Photo: E. Verrier

Photo: O. & E. Malherbe
www.aubrac2000.com
People

In 2000, about 8 inhabitants per km² (average Fr ≈ 100)

• From the early XXth century: large rural depopulation
• From 1954 to 1990: Change in total population = - 25%
• From 1990: the total population is rather stable

Source: INSEE
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Summary
Transhumance in Aubrac

High altitude pastures 900-1400 m Montagnes

Valley

Grazing
Calvings
Cows inside
Grazing
Grazing

Hay harvest

Photos: O. & E. Malherbe
www.aubrac2000.com

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Crisis in the traditional farming system

Traditional system
- Multiple purpose breed Aubrac: draught, milk, meat
- During the Summer period, cheese processing in “Burons”

Crisis in the early 60s’
- Motorisation → No more need of draught oxes
- Rural depopulation, changes in the way of life
  → No more people to spend the Summer period in altitude
What future for livestock production and for the Aubrac breed?

Evolution of the number of Aubrac cows

Source: French Ministry of Agriculture

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Change in the farming system

60s’-70s’: specialisation of herds - Milk production

Milk production in the lowest altitude area

Use of a breed with a better milking production: Swiss Simmental / German Fleckvieh

Milk processing in a single cooperative factory, with traditional techniques
- "Laguiole" cheese, with a Protected Designation of Origin (AOC)
- Milk price 30% higher than the average national price

Photo: SOPEXA

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Change in the farming system

60s’-70s’: specialisation of herds - Beef production

Conservation and development programme for the Aubrac breed

Maintenance of the transhumance system

Use of a the Aubrac cows as suckling cows

Crossbreeding with the Charolais breed

Photos: E. Verrier

Development of a large market for young suckled veals (9 months old)
→ up to 1 Million veals imported from France to Italy in a given year, all breeds considered

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Evolution of the population size

Evolution of the number of Aubrac cows

Expansion in other regions
(Massif central, Languedoc-Roussillon)

Source: French Ministry of Agriculture

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The value of the Aubrac breed

- Robustness
- Fertility and easy calving (even with a crossbred calf)
- Longevity
- Maternal behavior and milk production
Breeding programme

Performance recording:
efficiency of reproduction and growth measurements
Total No of recorded cows (in 2002) = 35 500 (= 34%)

Management of crossbreeding:
Proportion of cows mated to a Charolais bull = 67%
Proportion of cows mated to an Aubrac bull = 33%

Proportion of adult cows culled each year < 15%
Summary

Need to make evolve the farming systems and the breeding goals according to the environmental and social context

Value of a local breed to support a sustainable production and interest of crossbreeding with a more specialised breed

Importance of the dynamics and the organisation of farmers