

# CRIOLLO CATTLE OF NORTHWESTERN MEXICAN DESERTS

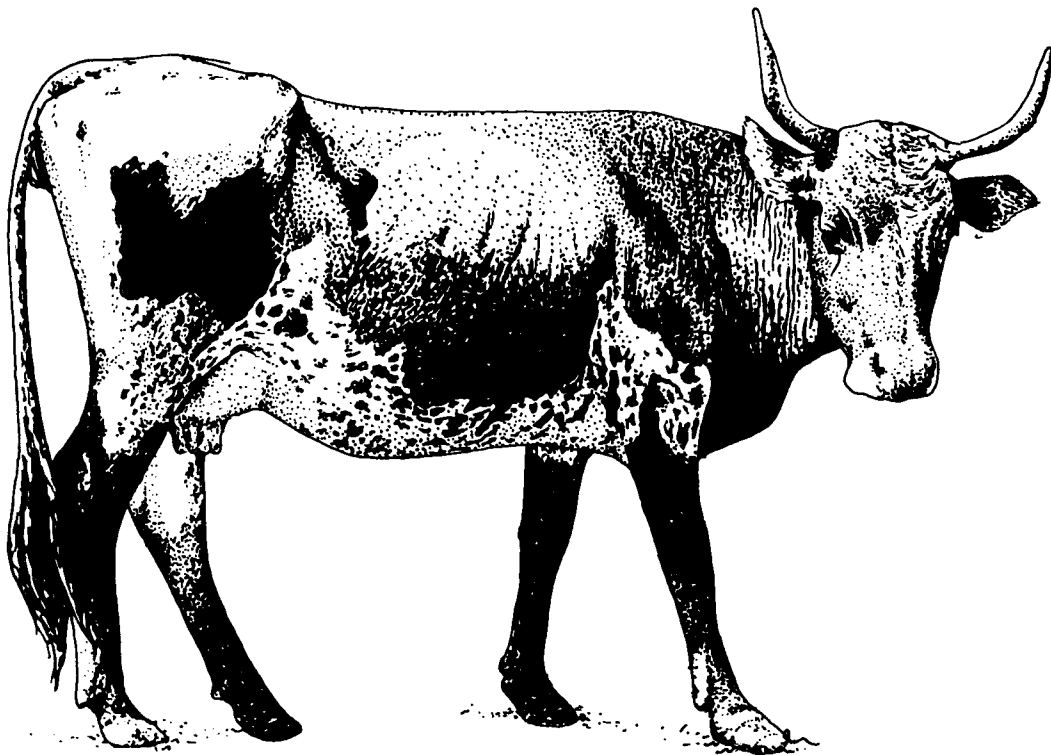
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The Spanish criollo cattle radiated into many locally adapted forms as they spread through the Americas, with its most famous progeny being the Texas Longhorn breed. In the deserts of northwest Mexico, criollo herds established in the 1690s gradually evolved into "one of the hardest bovine types which natural selection has ever produced," according to cattle historian John Rouse. Yet by the time Rouse briefly travelled to this arid region in the late 1960s, he lamented that "this type will probably not survive another decade, and with its disappearance will go... an irreplaceable ruminant which could someday have made a significant contribution in an overcrowded world."

Fortunately, recent interviews with livestock experts suggest that criollos have not only persisted in isolated areas, but their remarkable adaptations are being recon-

sidered. A 1981 survey of cattle breeds in the state of Sonora indicated that 63,000 head of "criollo corriente" or "native/Spanish cattle" remained there, primarily in the rugged sierras of eastern Sonora. Centered around the Sahuaripa, Sonora vicinity, the criollo corriente population runs on open ranges in mixed herds, among nearly a million "criollos cruzadas" or crosses with more recent introductions. Even in mixed herds, the criollos are known to forage differently, feeding upon a wider range of thornscrub vegetation than Zebu or European cattle breeds. They are considered hardy, but inferior in their ability for weight gain in wet years. They nevertheless command excellent prices from buyers who purchase them on contract for U.S. rodeos.

In Baja California, criollos have evolved into an even harder form, sometimes referred to as chinampos.



An example of Criollo cattle.

—Drawing by Kay Mirocha

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Perhaps 20% of the range cattle remaining in Baja California are criollos, with the purest examples persisting near Mulegé. They have been the long-term interest of a gifted veterinarian and ecologist, Dr. Aurelio Martinez Balboa of La Paz. He has documented how their 280 years of adaptation to desert conditions has resulted in a breed that is much like a wild desert herbivore in behavior and physiology. The criollos of Baja California have diverged from a parental form that weighed perhaps 500 kg to one that now weighs 300-350 kg. It is most active at night, and is primarily a browser on mesquite and palo verde, shrubs, cacti and succulents, the latter two providing it with much of its water. Under the same desert conditions, Baja criollos have a lower

metabolic rate, and their body temperatures remain at or under normal levels, while Angus and Herefords have 1 to 1.5° C higher temperatures under stress.

In 1979, Dr. Martinez proposed founding of an experimental ranch under a National Program for the Rehabilitation of Criollo Livestock at that time established by the Mexican government. Economic difficulties and political changes have kept plans for this ranch from proceeding. However, there is now some representation of criollos in Mexican livestock semen repositories. Dr. Martinez continues to have the implementation of such a program as his life goal; he may be contacted at Apartado Postal 43, 23000, La Paz, Baja California Sur, MEXICO.

#### REFERENCES

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#### FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS . . . ??

JERUSALEM-A mosquito infestation in Gulf of Aqaba port cities has brought Israel and Jordan into direct contact, despite the state of war that has existed between them since 1948, said a government official and an Israeli newspaper report.

Haaretz newspaper and an Israeli official said yesterday that mosquitoes plaguing the twin cities of Eilat and Aqaba on either side of the Israel-Jordan border were among local problems being discussed by low-level Israeli and Jordanian officials in a "de facto" peace. Talks also covered water supplies from the Jordan River and extraction of phosphates from the Dead Sea.

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