

Conservation of Karakachan sheep, Karakachan horse and Karakachan dog in Bulgaria



Sider Sedefchev, Atila Sedefchev
BBPS SEMPERVIVA, Bulgaria

BBPS SEMPERVIVA



Goals of BBPS SEMPERVIVA

The Bulgarian Biodiversity Presentation Society – SEMPERVIVA is a non-governmental, biodiversity conservation NGO, with a priority of work on studying and saving of rare autochthonic breeds of domestic animals in Bulgaria and also on the Balkan region.

Activities of SEMPERVIVA in this field include:

- n investigation the status of rare and endangered breeds
- n monitoring of breed populations
- n classification and standardization of autochthonic breeds
- n maintenance of herd books
- n efforts for legal status improvement on farm and *in situ* conservation
- n promotion and conservation of the cultural heritage, traditions and customs of native people
- n public awareness activities (including organizing exhibitions of rare autochthonic breeds)



Karakachan breeds conservation project



One of the projects, which includes all the above mentioned activities is: “Conservation of Karakachan sheep, Karakachan horse and Karakachan dog – one of the oldest breeds in Europe”.

The main goal of the project is: Conservation and restoration of the local, ancient breeds of Karakachan sheep, Karakachan horse and Karakachan dog, as one of the most primitive breeds in Europe and as a part of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of Bulgaria. Saving the traditional way of their breeding as a symbiosis among them and their living environment.

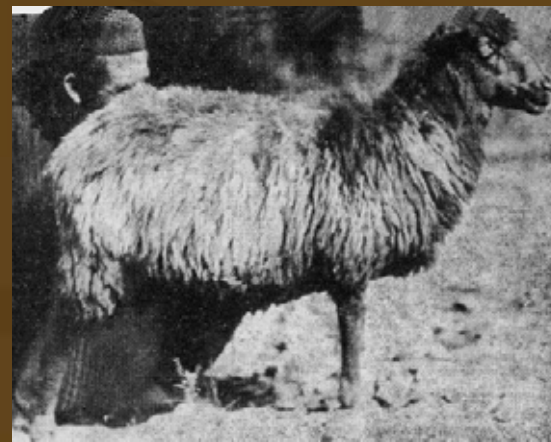
Karakachan breeds conservation project

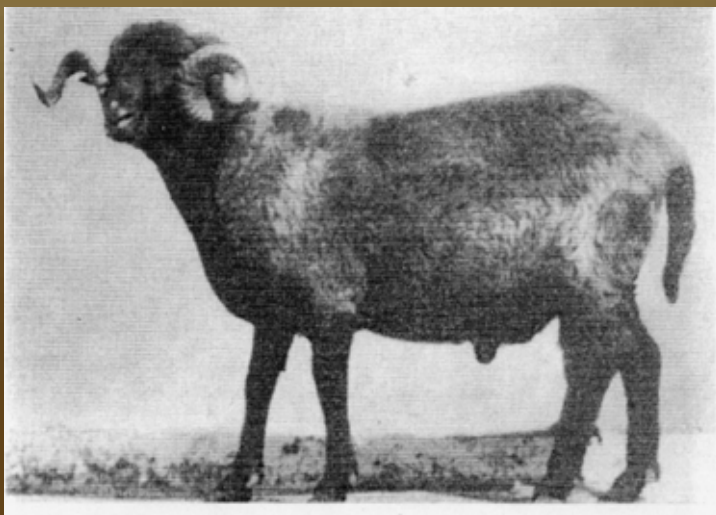
This long-term project starts in the beginning of 2001 and is supported by: SAVE Foundation, Frankfurt Zoological Society and private donors. The project aims to preserve from extinction the Karakachan sheep, Karakachan horse and the Karakachan dog. Collecting some of the last typical specimens of Karakachan sheep and horses, nucleus herds are being made. The aim is to breed the animals in the natural conditions these breeds have been selected, with the purpose to save them in their authentic type. The sheep move seasonally according to the availability of pasture, and the horses run free all year round. The guarding is entrusted with the irreplaceable Karakachan dogs, which complete the idea of nature friendly livestock breeding. Like this they will demonstrate in practice their working abilities. The main project base was made in Vlahi village in Pirin Mtn. Sheep and horse herds graze on the high alpine pastures of Pirin National Park. It is declared as a site of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention (UNESCO).



Karakachan sheep(Karakachanska ovca in bulg.)

The Karakachan sheep is accepted as the most typical and most primitive, coarse wool “zackel” type sheep (Chlebaroff, 1942; Savov, 1964; Balevska, 1967, etc.). This was proved by the craniometrical research of Balevska, Petrov (1967). According to the same authors this sheep is closest relatives of the European mouflon *Ovis musimon* on the Balkan peninsula.





Karakachan sheep(Karakachanska ovca in bulg.)

The Karakachan sheep had been one of the mostly spread breeds in Bulgaria in the past. In the beginning of XX century the population size had been more than 500 000 ind. In 1957, during the nationalization of the farming practice, the number is decreased to 158 896 ind. (Danchev,1994). After 1972 the government establishes flocks of Karakachan sheep in state livestock breeding institutes and state farms. But in 1990s, big part of sheep in those flocks do not correspond anymore to the original type of the breed. In the beginning of XXI century the breed is brought near to extinction. According to the Red Data List of the autochthonic forms of domestic animals, included in the National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy of Bulgaria (1994) the Karakachan sheep is categorized as **endangered** (Y. Danchev). The census carried out in the frames of SEMEPRVIVA project in 2002, registered 96 aboriginal animals of the original type of the breed. In 2004 the project herd already has 180 sheep.



Karakachan horse(Karakachanski kon in bulg.)

The Karakachan horse was the most consolidated breed from all the local primitive horses. This is due to the very conservative livestock breeding traditions of karakachan nomads. They had used these horses for transportation of their whole household, during the seasonal migrations. The pasture had been the only food for those animals. The horses which had not been currently used by people had stayed all year round high in the mountain in groups taking care about themselves. Even during cold winters they had found food and protected themselves from predators. Each Karakachan man had owned 50-100 horses in the past. In 1940s this number was decreased to 10-15 and seldom 50 animals from which 5 - 10 breeding mares from old breeding lines.



Karakachan horse(Karakachanski kon in bulg.)

In 1957-58 after the government took away the livestock from private owners, the Karakachan horses have not been in use by the state farms anymore. They had been just killed or exported for meat (mostly to Italy). Attempts have been made in the state farms to "improve" the breed by crossbreeding with Hucul, Kabardin and Haflinger. Till now the government does not have policy to save the aboriginal breeds of horses. There is no promotion of their valuable qualities.

According to the Red Data List of autochthonic forms of domestic animals(1994) the Karakachan horse is put in category II - **disappearing** forms (or **critical**). The census made by the SEMPERVIVA project in 2002, registered 362 animals.



Karakachan dog (Karakachansko kuche in bulg.)



The Karakachan dog is a very ancient breed of livestock guarding dog. It originates from the shepherd dogs of the ancient Thracians and Asian livestock protection dogs of the proto-Bulgarians. Karakachan people have bred this dog conservatively and have formed its present type. Due to its perfect working qualities, this breed has been widely used by shepherds in Bulgaria.

Similarly to the above two breeds, the socialist regime almost manages to annihilate the Karakachan dog.

Up to day the government has not supported the breed survival in any way, except including it in the Red Data List of the autochthonic forms of domestic animals as a **disappearing** breed (or critical).

SEMEPRVIVA started the work for saving the Karakachan dog in 1992. Since the beginning a breeding station has been established, where the breeding process is made on the base of aboriginal dogs. A breed standard and a herd book were worked out. An International Karakachan Dog Association was founded.

SEMPERVIVA has always aimed to save this breed as a working dog with its original qualities. In this aspect, since 1997, in cooperation with BALKANI Wildlife Society, dogs have been provided to livestock breeders for protection of their flocks against predators. In this way it is aimed to decrease the conflict between people and large carnivores (wolves and bears) and to restore the breed in its natural environment. This particular project has been supported by several foundations in different years of its implementation: European Natural Heritage Fund – EURONATURE, GzSW, UK Wolf Conservation Trust, ALERTIS. Thanks to these activities there is a slight trend of increase of working dogs.



The three breeds, subject of the project have been selected by Karakachan people, which are ancient, autochthonic, ethnic group of nomad livestock breeders. The three breeds, which are one of the oldest in Europe, had been numerous in Bulgaria before the nationalization of the private property during the socialist regime. As a consequence of that time politics in the farming practice, these breeds have been massively crossbred with foreign more productive ones and also huge numbers of them have been exterminated without control. All this have brought these karakachan breeds to the edge of extinction. In addition, nowadays the mountain livestock breeding is a losing practice. The government does not actively stimulate private livestock breeders to keep and work with autochthonic breeds.



Project results

In the frames of the project was achieved following results:

1. Investigation of the available literature about the three breeds and collection of personal comments was done.
2. Field investigations and census of the three breeds are conducted.
3. A project base was build up.
4. Herds of Karakachan sheep and Karakachan horse were established.
5. Selection in direction to the old, original type and increasing the numbers is conducted.
6. Traditional breeding using vertical, seasonal transhumant migration is practiced.
7. Village and horse tourism are being developed.
8. Public awareness activities were done.



Needs of future action

The conservation measures that are needed for saving karakachan breeds are also valid for saving of all the autochthonic breeds in Bulgaria. The project team defines the following points:

1. There is no legal base for conservation of local breeds in Bulgaria. In this aspect there is need of working out legislation referring specially to local breeds and their conservation.
2. Official differentiation of the original old type of the autochthonic breeds from their “improved” types needs to be made.
3. A genetic bank (of semen and embryos) needs to be established for autochthonic breeds.
4. The government should stimulate the use of alpine pastures and the seasonal migrations as more environmental friendly and as traditional for the old autochthonic breeds.
5. The existed government subsidies for National gene fund are given in wrong time of the year - in spring. Then the forage is most expensive and the owners do not need it at this time. The real need for additional feeding the animals is in winter. The government should correct giving the subsidies in proper time and increasing the amounts.

Literature:

- n Balevska R., Petrov Al., 1972: “Das Zackelschaf in Bulgarien und Sudosteuropa”. Sofia, Bulgaria(in Bulgarian)
- n “Conservation of Karakachan sheep, Karakachan horse and Karakachan dog – one of the oldest breeds in Europe. Project reports 2001-2003”. BBPS SEMPERVIVA, Pernik, Bulgaria
- n Danchev Y., 1994: “The preservation of autochthonous breeds of domestic animals in Bulgaria”. Bulgaria’s Biological Diversity National Strategy: Conservation Status and Needs Assessment:587-599
- n Hlebarov G., 1942: “Karakachan sheep”. Annals of Sofia University (in Bulgarian)
- n Petrov Al., 1940: “Karakachan horse”. Annals of Sofia University (in Bulgarian)
- n Savov T., Totev St.,1964: “Development of the sheep breeding in Bulgaria”, BAS Sofia, Bulgaria (in Bulgarian)



Sider Sedefchev, Atila Sedefchev
BBPS SEMPERVIVA
kv.Tvurdi livadi bl.51 ap.90
2300 Pernik, Bulgaria
e-mail: semperviva@bluelink.net; semperv@rotop.com